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Teaching Donkey to Talk: Nukes and Theology in Tehran-Washington Discourse

Lasha Tchantouridze¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of religion in international politics, most specifically, in the on-going discourse between the United States and Iran. The two letters written by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to President Bush and American people are used as a background for analysis. The letters are significant as they represent a unique case in modern international relations of interstate business being done through public epistles. Despite the fact that the US and Iran are very much at odds with each other, the presidents of the two countries display remarkable similarities in their outlooks on pressing social issues. Dominant values of the modern international system; however, do not allow for much sympathy for such outbursts of rhetoric in public letters, as the system itself makes most states follow almost the same set of values. The question of Israel figures prominently in Ahmadinejad's letters, as this state is the usual target of Iranian propaganda, and it also would be the most likely target of Tehran's nuclear program.

Keywords: Iran, Nuclear, Ahmadinejad, Israel, Bush

Introduction

Mixing religion and politics is not a new phenomenon in international politics, but it has become somewhat more prominent since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, it was Huntington who first poured religion and other things into a bizarre method of classifying cultures. He used religion as one of the criteria to classify civilizations among such other criteria as ethnicity, race, tradition, geopolitical construct, and nationhood. Besides

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that fact that Huntington used a blatantly flawed scholarly approach to qualify a single concept, he also indicated that religion signified the bad things by defining potentially the most anti-Western 'civilization' by it – the Islamic civilization. Two other suspicious 'civilizations' had a mixture of religion and ethnic background as the defining criterion: the Hindu civilization and the Slavic-Orthodox civilization (Huntington, 2002).²

Huntington's approach to defining civilizations is no different from a child classifying dogs by size, friendliness, colour, smell, and cuteness. Despite this, the idea of the clash of civilizations has caught on. A lot of opinion-makers around the globe started talking about it, mostly in private, occasionally in mass media, and academic circles. Al Qaeda ideologues were not far behind to follow this discourse as they were very happy to oblige with outrageous versions of the 'clash' (bin Laden, 1996). For Islamic fundamentalists it is the Crusaders and Jews who are the bad guys of world politics poised to dominate and dictate social order in every single Muslim village. Their manifests have been on par with Huntington and his followers in terms of accuracy, rigour, and scholarship. However, whether such analyses of current or historical events are flawed or not is irrelevant: as Huntington's bank managers and al Qaeda recruiters have found out crude explanations of complex things with admixture of religion and ethnic factors fascinate, interest, and mobilize people.

After 9.11 the whole issue of religion in international politics has become even more sensitive, indeed: on one hand there is Christianity, and Islam, with their own doctrines, and on the other hand democracy, freedom, and justice that are supposed to work around doctrines. Dichotomies between religious doctrines and secular societal values normally would not be a problem, if there were no violent struggles among peoples who are very often followers of these two great religions, and some of Judaism as well. The latter should be mentioned here, as it is not very popular nowadays among the Muslims of the Middle East and Central Asia where most of these 'clashes of civilizations' take place.

This paper seeks to comment on current Christianity/West – Islam/East discourse. There is much going on in this regard, from President Bush's

² With this new edition of the book, an unabridged audio book on cassettes was also offered with special sound effects and Paul Boehmer as the narrator.

Iraq project to 'Knight Bachelor' Salman Rushdie.³ In this paper, analysis is set against the background of the epistles sent by one prominent follower of Islam to one also prominent follower of Christianity and 'his' people – President Ahmadinejad's letters to President Bush and the Americans. Iran's president is an interesting character, to say the least, and he is more moderate and informed in his pronouncements of 'clashes' than al Qaeda ideologues and Huntington-type analysts. I also believe Ahmadinejad's letters to represent a unique case in modern international politics: Iran and the US are bitter rivals, both presidents claim to be ardent followers of their respective religions, and it seems rather unusual in any setting of one president to address another in a long public letter that is full of religious commentary and rhetoric.

Ahmadinejad's letters, most would argue, have been occasioned by the on-going stand-off between Tehran and Washington on the issue of Iran's nuclear program. Iran's leaders insist that the nuclear program has peaceful purpose only (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2007; and Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2007), while its detractors point out that any advanced nuclear program could lead toward atomic bombs (*CBS News*, June 22 2007, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 24 2007). Since Tehran and Qom, Iran's spiritual capital, are both known to favour *fatwas* and drastic acts of various sorts, opposition to the nuclear program is understandable. Tehran's nuclear gamble has very high stakes, and it is also a very difficult project to see through without major hiccups, almost as difficult as to teach a donkey to talk. The United States remains its most prominent foe, and Washington's calls to disrupt Iran's nuclear desires have been heard around the globe.

It would be fair to claim that with his letters President Ahmadinejad has tried both to criticize the US administration, and identify shared values between the two nations. The current US president has won two elections and received endorsement by the majority of US electorate mostly because of his exposition of traditional and conservative values based on Christian teachings. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current president of Iran, is a noted promoter of traditionalist and conservative values derived from the teachings of Kuran, who also has been elected to his office by the Iranian

³ Perhaps there is bitter irony in awarding the title of 'knight bachelor' to a person who has spent years hiding from his enemies.

people. Despite the fact that the US and Iran are very much at odds with each other, the world views of the two presidents seem to be very close: they both insist on the centrality of God in human political endeavors, as well as on higher values that should be paramount in policy making. In one of the most striking paradoxes of current international politics, the presidents of Iran and the US find themselves astonishingly close on most social issues, and worlds apart on crucial political questions concerning the Middle East.

Ahmadinejad Complains

In his May 2006 letter addressed to George W. Bush, President Ahmadinejad speaks of the contradictions between Christian values and US behavior in Iraq, and its treatment of the prisoners at Guantanamo (Ahmadinejad, 2006a). The underlying rationale in Ahmadinejad's polemic is that evidence found in US foreign policy conduct contradicts the values of President Bush's widely publicized Christian faith. The Iranian president bitterly points out that today's world is nowhere near to the ideal of universal justice Jesus Christ emphasized in His teachings:

Can one be a follower of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the great Messenger of God, feel obliged to respect human rights, present liberalism as a civilizational model, announce one's opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and WMDs, make war and terror his slogan, and finally, work towards the establishment of a unified international community – a community which Christ and the virtuous of the Earth will one day govern, but at the same time, have countries attacked, the lives, reputations, and possessions of people destroyed and on the slight chance of the... criminals in a village, city or convoy... set [them] ablaze (Ahmadinejad, 2006a).

His second November 2006 letter, Ahmadinejad addressed directly to the American people. He squarely blames the US administration for "many wars and calamities" "in this part of the world" (Ahmadinejad, 2006b). Ahmadinejad notes similarities in values held by the American and the Iranian peoples, and argues that such values bring the two nations together. "While divine providence has placed Iran and the United States

geographically far apart," he writes, "human values and our common human spirit" have brought "closer together" (Ahmadinejad, 2006b).

The Iranian president's letters are without equals in modern international politics: the president of a major regional power addresses the president of a global power, his rival, and then writes a letter to citizens of that country. One president is a committed Muslim, and the other is a born again Christian. Both of them wear their faith on their sleeves. Relations between their two countries are very tense, and there is no relieve in sight while relations between the two faiths are at a critical juncture as well.

Ahmadinejad's letter is critical of Bush's policies, but respectful as he emphasizes the doctrinal similarities between Christian and Muslim faiths: common prophets, belief in Jesus Christ (who is God to Christians, and a great prophet to Muslims), belief in one God who is active in the world, monotheism, the judgment day, salvation, the second coming and the promised world – the kingdom of God. Ahmadinejad also makes references to the issues that Mr. Bush also has stressed many times in his public speeches: "the attacks on... cultural foundations and the disintegration of [traditional] families," and "the fading of care and compassion" in modern societies (Ahmadinejad, 2006a). Ahmadinejad emphasizes that both Iranians and Americans are "God-fearing, truth-loving and justice-seeking, and both seek dignity, respect and perfection," and "both greatly value and readily embrace the promotion of human ideals such as compassion, empathy, respect for the right of human beings, securing justice end equity, and defending the innocent and the weak against oppressors and bullies" (Ahmadinejad, 2006b).

Extremists and/or illiterates from both Christian and Muslim sides believe that theologies of two faiths are fundamentally opposed and irreconcilable. In fact, as Ahmadinejad highlights it, Christian and Muslim theologies are remarkably close. Christianity had a lot of influence on the birth of Islam, especially the so called monophysite brand of Christianity. The 7th century Christians even thought that Islam was just another Christian heresy. For instance, it was St John of Damascus who held this idea among others (John of Damascus, c730). He served in a Muslim led government of Damascus, in which one of his closest friends was a leading figure, and the friend's father was the caliph of the city.

The Iranian president's passionate letters are very careful not to blame Christians and Christianity for many political problems that plague today's world. Instead, he calls President Bush to adjust American policies in accordance with the teachings of God, and His prophets. He stresses common values and ideals, as well as common problems and dangers experienced by most nations around the world.

It is difficult to say whether these letters have contributed to the opening of a new venue of communication and problem-solving between Washington and Tehran. Clearly intended for this purpose, the letters called for a direct dialogue between the two capitals. The US and Iran did start meeting and talking in Iraq first secretly, and then publicly. Ahmadinejad even echoed some Republican senators in their criticism of the United Nations system: "the people of the world have no faith in international organizations, because their rights are not advocated by these organizations" (Ahmadinejad, 2006a).

It has been common for both the US and Iranian governments, as well as for the governments of many other countries, to stress their 'own values,' and portray them as superior to those of others. This is a form of rhetoric and it is mostly intended for domestic public consumption and/or international posturing. The universal human values are, indeed, universal. Ahmadinejad makes a good point noting these similarities (Ahmadinejad, 2006b). The values of the international system are also the same for all states: every nation-state wants to survive, be economically wealthy and militarily secure; the governments of all countries want to remain independent and sovereign, they seek prestige and new opportunities, etc. These are the values of the international system, of which the nation states are still the most important actors.

From Religious Wars

Ironically, the modern international system was born out of squabbles of medieval European Christians – the 1648 Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War, of which Roman Catholics and Calvinists had been most prominent participants (Osiander, 1994: 16-19, Poli¹enski, 1978: 199). This treaty formally established the most important principles of the modern international system: non-interference, sovereignty, and states' rights to

engage in diplomacy, trade, as well as to make peace and war (Osiander, 1994: 77-82, Goldstein, 2005: 25).

The Peace of Westphalia is regarded as a formal birth year of the modern international system. Of course, making of the new international system was not a one year project; the transition lasted for a generation, but the 1648 treaty symbolizes the birth of inter-state arrangements that we take for granted today (Goldstein, 2005: 25, Kegley and Raymond, 2001: 3-10). Further, the treaty facilitated for the organization of nation-states, and all kinds of modern state and market institutions were born right before or soon after the Westphalia: large regular armed forces (Lee, 1991: 43-44), standardized drills and weapons (Guthrie, 2003: 21-27), and eventually formal government ministries, property systems, central banks, paper money, and so forth.

The Westphalian system is not the only international system. There have been others: city-states, medieval feudalism, the Holy Roman Empire, the Byzantine and Russian systems, to name few. International systems come and go, they are historical creations but were not established by God (there have been such claims made, but there is no evidence of this at least in Christian doctrine and Scriptures). Instead, the systems are better regarded as cultural phenomena created by humans, and there is no other reason in the world why the Westphalian system should be the dominant one today except for the fact that it has tramped all others through European military, economic, and cultural expansion since the 17th century (Black, 2002: 1-4).

It was during that long European war of the 17th century that massive propaganda efforts were undertaken by the warring sides. Both Roman Catholics and Protestant groups distributed propaganda material denigrated and criticizing their enemy – leaflets, pamphlets, line drawings and posters (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006:73). In 1622, the Roman Catholic Church even established a special department, *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, an organization in charge of propagating faith. This was done primarily to promote faith in the new world, but concerns related to Protestant opposition had to be adequately addressed as well (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006: 73-74). In the 20th century, Ayatollah Khomeini likewise assigned huge significance to propaganda:

The term propagation is so important issue that one could say the world is propagation governed. One should note that the most effective device which can help the revolution achieve its fruitful goals and expand it all across the world is propagation, the correct one. In this case one should not exaggerate. We possess what does not need any exaggeration. You should introduce Islam to the world as it is really, through the correct form of propagation.... You should propagate for God's satisfaction and this is a matter of high importance. The propagation is as harmful to the arrogant and cruel people as it is suitable to the benefit of the oppressed and the needy. The usage of propagation as a tool is much more effective than the usage of arms in the battle field... (Khomeini).

Soon after the victory of the Islamic revolution, the Islamic Propagation Organization was founded in Tehran. Thus, the formal state propaganda and public relation apparatus currently skillfully used, among others, by Iran's president also dates back in the 17th century European politics.

The Treaty of Westphalia formally ended, at least among the European officialdom, the medieval holistic (or totalitarian) view of human associations, according to which the matters of the church were not separate from political organizations. Europeans had fought and dies for their versions of Christianity, and not necessarily for their political entities. It is impossible to ever completely separate faith or religion from politics, but organizational tautology between the church and the state had to end in order to provide room for political compromise and diplomacy. One is unlikely to make concessions on the doctrine of the church, but politics, especially in international relations is built on compromises.

Many would agree that the Westphalian ideal of the sovereign decision-maker, as advocated by French cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin (Croxtton, 1999: 273-274), is still alive in the United States, despite a spectrum of religious discourse that surrounds the Bush administration. The same ideal is not; however, present in Iran – the whole idea of the Islamic revolution in that country was a rebellion against the Westphalian system, which has been seen by the cleric-revolutionaries as a set of institutions imposed by the West, which was foreign and harmful for the Persian culture. The Islamic Republic of Iran has attempted instead to make the religious and political organizations function as one organic whole guided by Shiia

conceptions of justice (The Office of the Supreme Leader, 2007).⁴ However, so far they have not gone far from the Westphalian model abandoned in 1979, and the issue of justice in Iran has been trampled daily – a common disease for all revolutionary regimes. According to human rights reports, human rights and freedoms further deteriorated in Iran in 2006 (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

We should address the case of the State of Israel as well, since the state in that country, in a sense, has become holier than religion, especially for secular Jews and in public discourse. It seems that Zionism, against which Ahmadinejad rails so much, a secular religion, has replaced the ancient religion of the Jews in its overall importance and meaning for the Jewish society. The modern Jews, unlike their ancient ancestors, fight and die not for God as much as they do for the state – just like most soldiers in most other places in the world. In public discourse and in academic writings there are claims equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism (Wistrich, 1985), as if being against a set of institutions means being against religion. In such discourse, religion here becomes synonymous not only with the concept of nation, but also that of the state (Drake, 2002: 203-205).

Ahmadinejad in his many anti-Israel pronouncements, and his letters to Bush and Americans, has condemned Zionism. It was his declaration – "world is better without Zionism," and his comments regarding the 2006 Lebanon war⁵ – that was translated into American public discourse as him calling to wipe out the State of Israel. In December 2006, the Iranian government organized a conference to promote revisions of common knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes toward the holocaust (*BBC News*, December 11 2006). This act by the official Tehran to 'revise' historical facts, and aggravate people concerned with the questions of holocaust, Zionism and anti-Semitism is not likely to be the last, as Iranian propaganda tries to 'outlaw' the State of Israel itself.

⁴ According to recent comment by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Sayyid Ali Khamenei, "unfair international relations" is currently on the "verge of collapse" (June 10 2007, <<http://www.leader.ir/langs/EN/index.php>>).

⁵ On June 8 2007, *BBC News* quoted Ahmadinejad saying that "the hegemony of Israel had collapsed, and the Lebanese nation pushed the button to begin counting the days until the destruction of the Zionist regime."

Israelis, on the other hand, face armed groups that have rebelled against the institutions of the modern international system, the central player of which is the nation-state. At the same time, Israelis are holding on to these institutions for dear life as they are seen the only guarantors of Jewish survival in their ancestral homeland. The radical armed groups, especially Hezbollah and Hamas, have themselves championed and promoted 'distinct' forms of human organization, based on their interpretations of Islam, because as they claim, the Western system has failed in the Muslim world (The Hizballah Program, 1985: 3).

State of Israel's creation itself has been a testimony to the privileges given to the institutions of nation-state in modern era. After World War II, the United Nations resorted to unprecedented steps in order to give Jews a credible protection from future persecution and atrocities. The world war victors' choice to grant Jews statehood in Palestine was obviously guided by their own preferences for such institutions. It was, after all, these institutions that had brought immense power and influence to the United States, and had helped the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union win the global battle with Nazism. However, the creation of Israel was still an exceptional move: the United Nations' 1947 Partition Plan decreed large sections of land in Palestine to be given to Jews, i.e. a minority group of people most of whom were either immigrants or foreigners. Resolution 181 called for the creation of separate Arab and Jewish states no later than October 1 1948, and the land under the British mandate was supposed to be divided in eight parts. Of these eight, three were to be given to the Arab State, and three – to the Jewish State. One part, the town of Jaffa, was expected to become an Arab enclave within the Jewish State, and one more, Jerusalem, an international city administered by the UN Trusteeship Council (The Plan of Partition, p. 1).

Evidence that the Westphalian system has failed in many parts of the world is painfully obvious even without Hezbollah's clarification: in Africa, the Middle East, predominantly Muslim countries many states are broken, deeply corrupt and/or exist in the grip of perpetual tyrannies. The Westphalian system was born in Europe, it is essentially an European system, created by Europeans for Europe. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that it does not work everywhere. In Turkey, for example, the nation-state was implanted by force by Kemal Pasha Atatürk at the cost of suppressing religion, and ethnic minorities. The system works better in

Turkey than in many other predominantly Muslim countries, but there is also price Turkish society has to pay for it: frequent suppression of freedoms, civil strife and war, a very strong role for the military, and marginalized minorities.

The violent resistance to the Westphalian system; however, has been promoted as 'holy' enterprise by some, most notably by al Qaeda and its mimics at the extreme end of resistance to Western influence in the world, and the leaders of Iran, the Hezbollah, and other groups of similar distinctions (bin Laden, 1996, The Office of the Supreme Leader, 2007). At its more moderate end, this rebellion is, in other words, not a rebellion of Muslims against Christians or a 'clash of civilizations,' but it is a rebellion against the Westphalian system and the established supremacy of the nation-state in international relations.

There is an alternative traditional story or myth championed by some 'rebels,' most notably Sunnis: once there was a single Islamic state, which was just and much superior in its approach to justice, freedom, education, ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities than any other political structure before or after it.⁶ This is as true as the claim that once there was a single Christian state as it was so wonderfully imagined by the Papacy as late as the beginning of the 19th century, when in 1806, the Holy Roman Empire was finally formally dissolved by Napoleon (Lee, 1991: 62). However, there was never a single Christian state or an empire, even under Charlemagne and his successors, as they were bitterly opposed and even despised by the Christian Eastern Roman Empire more popularly known as Byzantium. Such common civilizations or empires or states defined by religious identity have only been imagined for ideological or public relations purposes, but such imaginations are real. They are as real as al Qaeda suicide bombers or the *Clash of Civilizations* book sales numbers. The bottom line is that there has never been a single Muslim or a Christian state, at least in the modern understanding of this concept that implies nation-statehood with all its institutions, simply because there had not been the idea of nation-states and empires organized around a mother nation prior to 1648. When such national organizations became possible after 1648, the concepts of 'Muslim'

⁶ This story is becoming quite popular among young mainstream Muslims as well. For instance, some Muslim students in my classes have expressed their support for such an interpretation of world history, and Islam's place in it.

and 'Christian' became increasingly irrelevant in international relations, and instead, more mundane and vulgar human desires guided by greed and selfishness replaced Europeans' quest for power.

It is true; however, that there once was a common Muslim society, especially following decades and centuries after AD 622, and there was a common Christian society, at least for most of the time between 325 and 1054. The Muslim society was guided by many different rulers, some of them very just and enlightened, and others very violent and bloodthirsty. So was the case with the Christian society. However, to make claims that there was something in the past that resembled the modern state structures is very wrong and misleading. Any attempts to recreate that utopian state will end just like the Taleban experiment in Afghanistan: a set of very oppressive and violent institutions that would get eventually overthrown and destroyed by foreign intervention.⁷

Values and Interests

The current dangerous stand-off between the United States and Iran is not occasioned by the fact that these two countries have fundamentally different values, as Ahmadinejad himself notes in his letters, but it is so mediated by the reality of the diametrically opposed interests of these two nations. In his letters, Mr. Ahmadinejad prominently addresses one major area of disagreement between his country and the US: the state of Israel and Palestinian territories (Ahmadinejad, 2006a). However, he fails to note that there are policy preferences and priorities that feed such opposed interests in both Iran and the United States and elsewhere, not universal human values or religious norms.

The Iranian president puts in a single short paragraph the most pressing and urgent issue of current affairs – Tehran's desire to acquire advanced nuclear technologies. For him this is merely a matter of scientific research

⁷ It should be noted, that it was the United States that gave a major boost to political Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the 1980s, Washington actively supported and funded Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, because they were seen as effective tools in US' global struggle with communism. The United States failed to anticipate a transformation of these groups into a major anti-Western force, as the groups Washington funded in the 1980s became al Qaeda, the Taleban, and their numerous minor affiliates in the 1990s.

and development, "one of the basic rights of nations." According to Ahmadinejad, it is not proper to view scientific progress as a crime as if we were in the Middle Ages. Thus, Mr. Ahmadinejad avoids responsibility associated with the development and ownership of such technologies, and asks rhetorically: "why is it that any technological and scientific achievement reached in the Middle East regions is translated into and portrayed as a threat to the Zionist regime?" (Ahmadinejad, 2006a).

It is very likely that with his letters Mr. Ahmadinejad wanted to communicate more with the audiences in other countries, especially in his neighbourhood, rather than the United States. The letters are replete with rhetorical passages and theological references that may not be taken favourably in Washington. However, he does reiterate his willingness to engage in a direct dialogue with the US administration, and outlines some common grounds for it. The question of a direct dialogue between the two capitals is in order as UN agencies, Europeans and others find themselves incapable of dealing with implications of Tehran's nuclear program.⁸

The values that are common to all members of the international system are not difficult to identify if we look carefully at the actors involved in the case of Iran's nuclear program. What values would they like to preserve the most? Iran wants to *survive* as an Islamic State as it feels threatened by the United States; hence, the whole mess around its nuclear program. The State of Israel wants to *survive* as well, and it feels threatened by Iran and its proxies; hence, the 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The United States desires *survival* as well, which it will not do if it does not have access to resources; hence, the war in Iraq and pressure on Iran. After a closer examination, the desire to survive may not seem the only vital issue that concerns these countries, as there could be other important systemic values attached to it as well – power, prestige, prosperity, and so forth.

Do these international actors struggle to survive as religious or cultural entities? No, they fight to survive as nation-states, i.e. a set of sovereign institutions committed to protect a population within defined geographical

⁸ The United States and Iran have made baby steps in bilateral relations since Ahmadinejad mailed his first letter in May 2006 as the two sides have met in Iraq the Ambassadorial level in May 2007 (*The Guardian*, May 29 2007). The talks; however, were not a direct result of Ahmadinejad's letter – preparations were already underway in March 2006 (Karon, 2006).

boundaries. Does religion have anything to do with this struggle? Not directly, but the trouble is the American and Israeli way of survival does not agree with the Iranian way and vice versa. That is why religion is always highlighted when it comes to clashes of civilizations, axis of evil or desires to outlaw Zionism. Religion has come handy for many generations of rulers and ideologues of various brands as they have used it in general discourse with great skill to denigrate other cultures with 'weird' belief systems and customs.

Iran's Nuclear Expectations

In October 2004, I answered questions from the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) on the topic of Iran's nuclear program. One of the questions dealt with Iran's right to develop a peaceful research of atomic energy. I wrote the following:

The members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty could develop nuclear programs for peaceful use. However, experience and history of such developments suggest that most nuclear technology could have dual use. That is, it would be relatively easy to build nuclear weapons once peaceful nuclear technology is well developed. It is estimated that countries like Japan and Germany could manufacture nuclear bombs very quickly if they decided to do so. This is why nuclear technology adds to security dilemma: countries may want to increase their economic wealth or security, but at the same time other countries many feel threatened by such developments. Germany and Japan are not perceived as dangerous because of their well-defined policy that renounces the development of nuclear weapons. They are also well integrated with their neighbours and trading partners. Iran, on the other hand, finds itself in a very difficult neighbourhood, which is less stable and predictable, but very important for world's economic growth. Therefore, it would be logical to expect that Iran would try to guarantee its survival in this neighbourhood as much as possible. Because of this, many policy makers in Washington and elsewhere suspect that Tehran's ultimate desire is to have access to well developed peaceful nuclear technology that could be used for military purposes, if circumstances require so (Tchantouridze, 2004).

[Almost] three years have passed since then, and nothing has changed in Tehran's approach to the question of nuclear technology. The negotiations

with Europeans have failed, and Iran remains unmoved by threats of UN sanctions. There could be only one reading of Iran's staunch commitment to the nuclear program, and its unwillingness to compromise on it: Tehran, indeed, tries to develop peaceful atomic energy program to its fullest, so it is able to manufacture nuclear weapons very quickly if its national survival asks for it.

Iran's nuclear capability will not likely to ever match with that of the United States. Tehran will not be able to achieve strategic parity with the US for the next century or two – it is a smaller country, does not have intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, array of satellites, ocean going navy nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers. Even if Iran develops nuclear weapons anytime soon, the only American things they could possible target would be US military and civilian satellites, provided Tehran builds missiles capable reaching the geostationary orbits first. However, nuclear Iran could be a very real and credible threat for the State of Israel, the chief US ally in the Middle East.

Let us entertain a scenario, according to which Iran has a capability to quickly manufacture as many nuclear warheads as Israel can. Currently the State of Israel has a strategic edge as it possesses nuclear capability (whether that capability is real or potential is irrelevant, since Israel's nation-state based enemies believe it to be real, and they feel deterred by it). If that become a reality, Israel would lose its strategic edge and confidence. A nuclear war between Israel and Iran will be very unlikely, but Hezbollah, Hamas and like organizations would harass Israel with greater consistency and perseverance. Israel would not be able to pursue its enemy beyond its borders, and the Lebanon war circa 2006 will become a history. Such incursions would be deterred by conventional retaliations by Iran, and Syria. Israel may not be able to escalate in response, as this may trigger nuclear response from Iran. If we imagine unimaginable, a nuclear war between Iran and Israel, the latter's disadvantage would become painfully clear – Iran has a huge advantage in terms of real estate, geographical size, and size does matter in nuclear strategy. With a very unlikely equal nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran, the latter would sustain massive damages but survive, and the former would be annihilated.

Such a scenario is; however, in no one's interest. Iran will not gain anything from a nuclear exchange with Israel, as it would destroy a whole series of

holy sites, not to say anything about many millions of people in and around Israel. Further, it may provoke retaliation or even a preventive strategic strike by the Americans and their allies. A preventive strategic strike would become very likely if a hypothetical conventional war between Israel and Iran and its allies escalates. In other words, nuclear weapons may become a liability rather than advantage for Iran.

Israel would maintain a strategic edge even over nuclear Iran as long as the United States remains firmly committed to the region. But how long this firm commitment will last? Would it last for another 30 or 80 years or longer? How long will the US survive as the dominant global power? Will its influence last beyond the end of cheap crude oil reserves? Could it be challenged by other emerging or re-merging global players? These and similar questions (Wilner, 2007: 21) pose dilemmas that no one can solve with great certainty, but it is clear that Tehran is banking on such uncertainties that are unavoidable in the Middle East.

Conclusion

According to one tale, Mullah Nasreddin once volunteered to teach Sultan's favourite donkey Arabic, as Sultan was promising generous funding to anyone who would undertake such a remarkable task. Mullah requested minimum five years for his project, took money and the donkey and went home. His wife was horrified, and commanded Mullah to take the donkey back to Sultan so to avoid an imminent death penalty in five years. Mullah Nasreddin refused and replied: "five years is a long time; in five years time either this donkey will be dead or me or the Sultan himself..."

Iran's nuclear program, like Mullah Nasreddin's talking donkey, is a long-term project. Strategists in Tehran expect someone to wither away in Middle East's tough international political and military environment, and its geopolitical landscape to change. They need to be careful, though, that it is not them who bites the dust first. Tehran needs to tread carefully so to avoid wrath of the United States. After all, the nuclear donkey may never talk, while Iran needs to survive as it has done many times throughout centuries.

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