



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Iranian Nuclear Program: Impacts on Saudi-Iran Relations**

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| PAPER INFO  | ABSTRACT  |
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| <b>Received:</b><br>January 28, 2019<br><b>Accepted:</b><br>May 13, 2019<br><b>Online:</b><br>June 30, 2019 | This research aims to analyze the regional and international factors which have affected the policies and stance adopted by two important Iranian regimes towards Iranian nuclear program by using a comparative method discussed under the neo-realist approach. States claiming sovereignty develop offensive military capabilities to defend themselves and extend the power. It is generally assumed as a fact that Iranian nuclear program is a matter of unprecedented threat for Saudi Arabian territory and its allies in the region as well. As it is perceived that existence of nuclear threat is sufficient to embolden Tehran's belligerence in the proxy wars against Riyadh as both is engaged aggressively, wrestling across the region for hegemony and leverage. The ceaseless quest for regional hegemony fluctuated over the entire Middle East for last many decades. Especially, the post-2003 era is characterized by the Shi'ite-Sunni sectarian tensions, which have greatly shaped the Saudi response to the Iranian nuclear program. |
| <b>Keywords:</b><br>Nuclear Program<br>Neo-Realist<br>Approach, Proxy<br>War, Sectarian<br>Violence         |   |
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**Introduction**

International argument over Iran's nuclear program seizes world's attention, over the substantial regional security challenge, generally since its

inception and particularly for the last one and a half decade. It is mainly due to the fact that Tehran occupies a major geopolitical location and massive involvement in crucial Middle Eastern affairs. Although according to Chicago Tribune (2009) it was launched in 1950's as 'Atoms for Peace' program with the support of U.S.

Due to the long history of conflict, clash of interests, distrust is found between both the regional powers. It is generally assumed as an indisputable fact that Iranian nuclear program is a matter of unprecedented threat for Saudi Arabian territory and its allies as well. The existence of nuclear threat is sufficient to embolden Tehran's belligerence in the proxy wars against Riyadh as both are engaged aggressively, wrestling across the region for hegemony and leverage. The ceaseless quest for regional hegemony, due to the uncertain political and security conditions fluctuate over the entire Middle East for last many decades. All this support the neo-realist approach, according to which, states claiming sovereignty develop offensive military capabilities to defend themselves and extend the power. Especially, the post-2003 era is characterized by the Shi'ite-Sunni sectarian tensions, which have greatly shaped the Saudi response to the Iranian nuclear program. According to the Saudi government, an Iran equipped with nuclear teeth would be a source of imminent danger for the entire Middle East region especially Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah warned on a number of occasions that if Iran will develop nuclear warheads "everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia" (Black & Tisdall, 2010).

### **M. Khatimi Regime and Iranian Nuclear Program**

Neither Iran's quest for nuclear capability was new, nor the concerns of Saudi Arabia and the international community, but these concerns turned into serious reservations as the whole landscape of international and especially regional politics changed after 9/11 terrorist's attacks. Suspicions further fueled by the disclosure of Iranian exile group in 2002 regarding Iran's enrichment of a secret nuclear facility which can be further used for nuclear weapons. This particular disclosure dashed Muhammad Khatimi efforts to bridge the gap between Riyadh and Tehran to ground moreover it puts Khatami's government in a defensive position. This revelation coincided with

the issue of weapons of mass destruction to extremist elements and critical regional security conditions turned Tehran's nuclear program into a major defining political preoccupation in home and abroad (Chubin, 2003).

Although Iran always claimed peaceful intentions regarding its nuclear program, cooperated to some extent with the IAEA, but according to the IAEA, there were sufficient evidences that the Tehran's long term aspiration were to create nuclear weapons (IAEA sources). As the BBC reported that "the IAEA was unable to confirm Iran's assertions that its nuclear program was exclusively for peaceful purposes and that it had not sought to develop nuclear weapons"

Under severe "international pressure" and "deteriorating economic conditions" Khatimi voluntarily agreed to suspend uranium enrichment for an unspecified time and permitted international inspections after agreement with "EU 3". This particular action added lots of difficulties for Khatimi's government and faced tremendous criticism from the hardline elements at home for not taking appropriate position or hard stance for the national interests of the country.

### **Saudi Perception Regarding Nuclear Iran**

Saudi Arabian apprehension as one of the most influential power of the Islamic world and the region was that a nuclear Iran would worsen the existing fragile security conditions of the region and the balance of power will straight away, swing in the favor of Tehran. It might lead to an unending nuclear arms race in the whole region. Additionally, it would enable Tehran to dictate smaller regional states and interfere regional and global issues, according to its own terms and conditions and lastly a nuclear Iran may stimulate the Shiite communities in Sunni dominated monarchies for regime change by using violent means. These apprehensions again consolidate the neo-realist approach that due to the fear of cheating and states relative gains, states are hesitant to trust each other.

The Guardian reported in September 2003 that Saudi Arabia had initiated a strategic security review that included the possible procurement of

nuclear weapons According to that report, in the strategy paper, three choices have been considered:

- To procure a nuclear capability for deterrence.
- To enter into an alliance (with nuclear power) to ensure protection in case of any aggression.
- To struggle to reach out a regional pact or agreement on having a nuclear-free region.

However, according to The Guardian (2003) Riyadh immediately rejected such allegations and reported that neither Saudi Arabia is considering nuclear program acquisition, nor it has longing for entering in any nuclear umbrella alliance.

According to "*Cicero*" a German magazine, there were satellite evidences in 2004-05, that Saudi Arabia was working on Pakistani-designed, house-long missiles as Pakistani nuclear scientists visited Saudi Arabia under the cover of hajj pilgrims and Saudi scientists had been working in Pakistan. Whereas, according to media reports, there are fair chances of purchase of nuclear technology from Pakistan, as Riyadh highly financed Pakistan nuclear program in the past. If it would happen, it must be the first ever purchased atom bomb in the world rather than created.

### **Nuclear Israel as Important Factor**

Nuclear Israel is a security or even an existential threat for Middle Eastern states as well as for Iran and one of the major reasons (along with many other reasons) behind the nuclear program of Iran because Iran considers Israel's existence as illegitimate and wants to wipe Israel out from the global map. Although King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia said, on 7 November, 2007 while visiting Germany, "Iran has announced its nuclear program is intended for peaceful use, if this is the case, then we don't see any justification for escalation, confrontation and challenge, which only makes issues more complicated".

But according to reports, apparently Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states did not react to the Iranian nuclear program in the way the US did, these states, according to media reports, pursued two contradictory sets of policies—official as well as secret—to deal with the Iranian nuclear program. Officially, they neither supported nor directly opposed Iran on the nuclear issue; their preferred strategy was to link the Iranian nuclear program for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) -free Middle East region, which also implicated Israel. Disclosure of Wiki leaks that Riyadh is having a dual policy towards Iran, as apparently they show their composure on Iranian issue, but behind the curtains they compel U.S to attack and demolish an Iranian nuclear program once and forever, further fueled the distrust among both the nations (Black & Tisdall, 2010).

### **Iranian Nuclear Program and Other Middle Eastern States**

Beside, KSA, other smaller regional countries, like UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, and Oman remained equally concerned about a nuclear-armed Iran so is the U.S and West (Habibi, 2008). The closest allies of Riyadh and UAE Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayid and the Bahraini King Hamad Al-Khalifa had also called for US military action against Iranian nuclear facilities in 2006 and 2009 respectively, in response to the concerns of these countries that the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a nuclear security guarantee to the Gulf Arab states in July 2009. The UAE had already signed nuclear agreements with France to counter Iran's nuclear ambitions. The six GCC states (Gulf Cooperation Council) declared their intention to initiate a joint nuclear development program back in December 2006. However, they are also worried of the aftermaths of a military strike on Iran (Katriri,2012).

Egypt and Saudi Arabia showed their deep concerns regarding the weaknesses of the NPT and criticized that NPT didn't serve and safeguard the interests of Arab states. It remained unable to disarm Israel and restrict it to join the NPT. Persistently repeated calls from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern nations remained unsuccessful to create a weapon of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East.

Some of the Western media reports suggested that the Kingdom has been taken into confidence by the Israel in case they launch any air strike on Iranian nuclear sites and Riyadh have given its consent for providing its airspace to attack Iran. According to media reports, it looks as the Europeans, Americans and the Arabs (especially Saudi Arabia) have unanimity of views that they must block Iran's path of becoming a nuclear state, and in case of failure on a diplomatic level, all other options including a military strike should be used as a last resort, to prevent the Tehran from accomplishing nuclear weapon.

### **Regional and International Security Conditions**

According to neo-realism theory of International relation by Kenneth Walt (1979) interaction of sovereign states can be explained by the pressure exerted on them by the anarchic structure of the international system, which limits and constrains their choices. Same happened in case of Iranian nuclear program. Toppling of the Taliban regime and Saddam Hussein in 2001 and 2003 respectively along with the hard rhetoric against Iran by George Bush, proclaiming Iran as "an axis of evil", and Bush pre-emptive strike doctrine, was perceived as an existential threat by Tehran, which later paved the way for the victory of conservative hardliners in 2004 parliamentary as well as for presidential elections in 2005 and the new government took rather more hard and aggressive stance verbally as well as practically in the coming years.

These shaky regional security dynamics along with comparatively better and stable economic conditions (as Iran received \$ 32 billion in 2004, and \$ 45.6 billion in 2005, compared to 1998 and 1999 oil revenues which were \$ 16 and \$ 10 billion dollars respectively) provided the chance to the Ahmadinejad to increase the exacerbation and the uranium enrichment started once again (Chubin, 2010)

### **Ahmadinejad Stance towards Iranian Nuclear Program**

President Mahmud Ahmadinejad proclaimed that the nuclear program is "like a train without brakes" and called it their national right to access nuclear capability (Dorraj, et.al, 2006: 329) and took the stance that Tehran is doing what actually Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is permitting to do.

Shortly after his election in 2005, President Ahmadinejad said that Iran would not accept any American dictation and warned the US against so doing (The Guardian, 2012). Finally, uranium enrichment became a slogan of elites as well as the common people in Iran (Chubin, 2006) Later, Ahmadinejad refused to enter into negotiations over Tehran's uranium enrichment program, to strengthen his position with the supreme command and other hardliner elements within Iran. As the Iranian nuclear program was primarily motivated by deterrence, regional goals, and internal regime's popularity.

President Ahmadinejad during his rare visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2007, he not only discussed with King Abdullah about the growing political crises and violence in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq but also talked about the Iran nuclear issue and firmly declared that in case of any military expedition against Iran by Israel or U.S entire region would be affected. However, Saudi officials remained persistent that they supported the UN Security Council Resolutions and in case of any regional confrontation they would be ready to ensure the security of their country.

Ahmadinejad, who was famous for his radical approach and hard rhetoric, accused Saudi Arabia of seizing his nuclear expert and further handed over to U.S in 2009 who was on pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia (M. Warner, 2013: 121, 122). The failure of talks on Iran's nuclear program in Istanbul in April, 2012 and in Baghdad in May, 2012 evidently indicated that Ahmadinejad was not ready to give any concession on this particular issue although Tehran faced multi-rounds of international sanctions.

### **Conventional and Nuclear Arms Race**

Although the Saudi foreign minister announced that his country has no threat from Iranian nuclear program. Yet the terror of a nuclear enriched Iran motivated the neighboring states to acquire nuclear capability both as a security hedge and also for domestic political consumption (Fitzpatrick, 2008: 381).

As the neo realists claim, that state claiming sovereignty develop offensive military capabilities to defend themselves and extend the power. It is evident that along with nuclear capability, arms race for conventional and

unconventional weapons has clearly and openly started, especially by Saudi Arabia if not the entire region. As Riyadh spent 8.7 billion on arms - agreement in 2008, along with a Russian deal of billion dollars to purchase missile defense weaponry which Iran purchased already. The Stockholm International Institute (SIRP) released data about "trends in the International Arms Transfer" according to this Saudi Arabia became the tenth biggest conventional weapons importer from 2008-12 whereas in 2013 Saudi Arabia was among the five top importers and in 2014 the world's largest importer of arms was none other than Saudi Arabia.

Although there was a massive influx of petrodollars during the Ahmadinejad regime due to his controversial economic policies and illegal oil sale yet the Iranian nuclear program came at a cost to the nation's economy. Though nuclear capability increased due to Iran's inflexible stance, but at the cost of domestic and economic infrastructure which collapsed. These policies faced criticism, not only on an international level, but the masses in Iran started to agitate against it as well, which finally led to the change of leadership in Iran. A report by the Congressional Research Service assesses that the sanctions levied against Iran drove the nation to accept an interim agreement on November 24, 2013.

The US on its part, perceives a nuclear-armed Iran not only as an existential threat to Israel, but also a risk to its strategic as well as economic interests in the Middle East and a serious challenge to Washington's traditional Arab allies, most notably the Saudi Arabia. The Iranian nuclear deterrence definitively altered the regional balance of power and put security and strategic interests of Riyadh at serious risk (Habibi, 2008). Yet it is also an irrefutable fact that fragile and threatening regional and international security conditions drove Iran towards acquiring nuclear capability for deterrence. Tehran views its nuclear program as the last resort against any possible aggression and to counter the existential threat lurking around due to the failure of regional nuclear disarmament.

A nuclear Iran is likely to enfeeble Saudi influence in the region and minimize its role as U.S. allies in the Middle Eastern region. Many Arab countries admit that beside Iranian nuclear crisis, Israel's nuclear arsenal is a



matter of serious concern. If all regional states, including Saudi Arabia found themselves encircled by nuclear-armed Iran and Israel, it would create an immense pressure on them to seriously consider security alternatives, for instance to develop a hidden nuclear program, but such a venture would have great political consequences, finally there is a nuclear Saudi Arabia scenario. It might be improbable for Riyadh to develop a nuclear program of its own, but there is a fair chance of acquiring nuclear weapons from other channels like Pakistan. This could drive the region to the nuclear arms race, which is likely to be threatening, destabilizing with serious consequences.

Nuclear proliferation would remain dream without reality, and those regimes could collapse which helped in the past to decrease nuclear proliferation, if many actors opted to go for nuclear weapon technology. To precisely predict the actual outcome of a nuclear-armed Iran would be very difficult. Many believe that stability would be brought into the world by more states having nuclear weapons, and irrational behaviors would be unfounded and overblown. Another group of analysts argues that more instability would be brought by a nuclear Iran and the rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran will be intensified, the breach between Sunni and Shiite would be further deepened.

A third group predicts that a nuclear Iran, at a certain stage in the future, would push the entire region towards a major or even a nuclear war, involving not only Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also the U.S. All the scenarios discussed and analyzed above, on an empirical basis, hold enough water and can either be accepted or rejected. However, the western media seems to exaggerate the pessimistic view for their own vested interests.

### **Conclusion**

In this research observed that the neo-realist approach remained dominant in Saudi-Iranian relations and their ties remained a victim of uncertainty. This uncertainty led to lack of trust among the states. Both were never sure of each other's intentions and were fearful that the other would cheat in case of an agreement or attempt to come closer to gain advantages over the other; therefore, they must always be on their guard. This approach drove the policies of both the states to develop offensive military capabilities

and strategic arms race in the region. The abrupt changes in regional and international levels as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S compelled the regional powers into the conditions of uncertainty due to the prospect of cheating and relative gains by the other states in the region.

This widespread uncertainty poses a potential threat to the security of Iran and pushed the Iranian masses and policy makers to consider and counter the existential threat posed by the U.S president Bush and his allies. On one hand Iran looked at its nuclear program as its ultimate and final source of survival and on the other hand perceived as open threat by Saudi Arabia. Now Saudi Arabia is on the top of the international arm importer list, though Riyadh has no visible security threats in the conventional sense other than the threat perception from Iranian nuclear program. Whereas these heaps of imported weapons perceived an automatic signal of threat on the Iranian side and they started considering nuclear program as the last hope for their honorable survival as well as the security of their national interests in the region.

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