

Understanding Iran's Quest for Nuclear Technology: The Importance of Ideology

by Joseph S. Spierl (January 2018)



Since its completion in July 2015, the Iran Nuclear Deal^[1] has been re-shaping the Middle East. An understanding of the Middle East thus requires an understanding of this controversial deal. Moreover, the Trump administration has realized that the deal is easier to criticize than to reverse, enshrined as it is in a UN Security Council Resolution that is protected by the veto-power of pro-Iranian states like China and Russia.^[2] As for the European parties to the agreement (France, Britain, and Germany), the *New York Times* reports that “[t]hey have shown little enthusiasm for revisiting the deal, let alone undercutting it.”^[3] The European Union’s top foreign policy official, Federica Mogherini, has stated, “Renegotiating part of the agreement or the entire agreement is not an option.”^[4]

The Iran Nuclear Deal places only temporary restrictions on Iran's ability to enrich uranium.[\[5\]](#) In the meantime, it allows Iran to continue research on a new generation of highly efficient centrifuges in preparation for the day when restrictions are lifted and Iran can build a state-of-the-art nuclear industry.[\[6\]](#) When that day comes, Iran's "break-out time"—the time it needs to produce enough enriched uranium for a bomb—will be reduced to almost zero. We have this on the authority of Barack Obama himself. In an interview with NPR's Steve Inskeep in April 2015, then-President Obama made the following statement: "What is a more relevant fear would be that in year 13, 14, 15, they have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that time the breakout times would have shrunk down almost to zero."[\[7\]](#) Nuclear arms control expert David Albright makes the same prediction: ". . . at the end of year 15 of the deal, Iran has stated it will have industrial-size enrichment facilities. With this capability . . . breakout times will decrease toward a few days."[\[8\]](#) The *New York Times*, which has described the Iran nuclear deal as "one of the Obama administration's major triumphs,"[\[9\]](#) also concedes that "most of the significant constraints on Tehran's program lapse after 15 years—and, after that, Iran is free to produce uranium on an industrial scale."[\[10\]](#) Former top U.S. diplomat Nicholas Burns, who testified in favor of the Iran deal before Congress, also points out "the deal's principal weakness—it could permit Iran to emerge stronger 10 to 15 years from now as restrictions on its nuclear program begin to lapse."[\[11\]](#) Iran expert Ray Takeyh points out that "the nuclear deal is Iran's legal path to the bomb."[\[12\]](#)

An underreported aspect of the Iran Deal is the ideology and world-view of the Iranian regime founded in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and ruled today by his hand-picked successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. If Iran is set to become a nuclear-threshold state, it is of utmost importance to understand the ideology that motivates Iran's leadership. This

paper explores this ideology for the sake of understanding longer-term Iranian motives and goals.

Iran claims that it must have its own domestic uranium enrichment capacity to meet its future energy needs. Yet, among all the nations of the world, Iran sits atop the second largest proven reserves of natural gas[\[13\]](#) and the fourth largest proven reserves of oil.[\[14\]](#) Iran, an arid and sunny country with vast deserts,[\[15\]](#) also has great untapped potential for wind and solar energy. Even if Iran needed nuclear energy, it could import nuclear fuel at less cost than making it for itself, or it could import low-enriched uranium to make its own fuel rods. Iran does not need large arrays of efficient centrifuges capable of manufacturing highly enriched uranium in order to have nuclear energy. Such a capability makes sense only if Iran wishes to enrich uranium to bomb-grade purity.

Why does it matter so much to the Iranians that they should become a nuclear-weapons threshold state? Why have they been willing to sacrifice so much to achieve this aim, when their domestic energy needs clearly do not require them to possess an advanced uranium enrichment capability? To answer this question, we must turn to the worldview of the Iranian regime. The mainstream Western media rarely inform their audiences of the world-view that shapes and motivates Iran's leaders. Yet understanding that world-view is central to the question of whether Iran can be trusted as a nuclear-threshold state.

In fact, the ideology of the Iranian regime bears all the traits that made Nazi Germany such a lethal threat to humanity: genocidal anti-Semitism, paranoid conspiracy thinking, dehumanization of the "other," imperialism, totalitarianism, and apocalyptic thinking. Given the world-view of the Iranian regime, it is highly unlikely that they would *not* seek nuclear weapons. If Iran becomes a nuclear-threshold state, it will almost certainly also become a nuclear-armed state.

Anti-Semitism and Conspiracy Thinking

In his biography of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian journalist and scholar Amir Taheri writes: “The Ayatollah was . . . convinced that the central political theme of contemporary life was an elaborate and highly complex conspiracy by the Jews—‘who controlled everything’—to ‘emasculate Islam’ and dominate the world thanks to the natural wealth of the Muslim nations.”[\[16\]](#) Khomeini repeatedly accused the Jews, and Israel, of attempting to destroy the Islamic faith.[\[17\]](#) Khomeini taught his followers that the Jews “would never be satisfied with anything less than world domination.”[\[18\]](#) He was therefore committed to “the cause of physically destroying the Jewish state and forcing its inhabitants out of the Middle East . . .”[\[19\]](#) Khomeini also taught that “America, dominated by ‘evil Jews,’ is Islam’s arch-enemy . . .”[\[20\]](#) Thus, the chants of “death to Israel” and “death to America,” still heard routinely on Iranian streets and encouraged by top Iranian leaders,[\[21\]](#) are more than mere rhetoric. If the Jews control Israel and America and are plotting to destroy Islam, the most important thing on earth, then destroying Israel and America becomes a clear moral obligation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Indeed, Khomeini’s anti-Semitic legacy is alive and well in Iran and has become a central component of the Iranian regime’s world-view. Anti-Semitic messages from senior officials and the major Iranian media “typically denounce Jews at large, attribute to them unique negative characteristics, and depict them as an eternal force for evil and the root of evil in the world since ancient times—perceptions which have their theological and psychological roots in early Islamic traditions.”[\[22\]](#) Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010, for example, denied that Israeli Jews are even human, asserting that they “only appear to be human,” and anyway, since they are atheists, they “are not entitled to man’s minimal rights.”[\[23\]](#) Ahmadinejad is joined in this Jew-hatred

by so-called “moderates” such as former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who at the annual “Jerusalem Day” in 2007 explained to his audience that the Nazis’ “first objective was to free Europe of the evils of Zionism,” and this was entirely justified, because “the Zionists . . . constituted a strong political party in Europe, causing much disorder there. Since the Zionists had a lot of property and controlled an empire of propaganda, they made the European governments helpless.”[\[24\]](#) Here we see retrospective justification of Nazi persecution of the Jews, the complete obliteration of any distinction between Judaism and Zionism, and the assumption of an all-powerful Jewish conspiracy.

An extremely important aspect of contemporary Iranian anti-Semitism is the role of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery produced by the Tsarist Russian secret police in the early twentieth century in which the Jews are portrayed as conspiring to take over the world and destroy all non-Jewish religions.[\[25\]](#) “The Islamic Revolution [of 1979] was accompanied by a continuous wave of Protocols editions, alongside other anti-Israel and anti-Jewish texts.”[\[26\]](#) The Iranian state promotes the *Protocols* as part of its official propaganda: “. . . since the revolution, they have been issued by government publishing houses such as that of the Revolutionary Guards, the department of Translation and Publication, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, and the Propaganda Department.”[\[27\]](#) Moreover, “. . . state-run Iranian television regularly broadcasts documentaries and drama shows based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Such programs claim that the State of Israel was founded on the basis of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which exposed the Jewish plot to take over the world.”[\[28\]](#)

In his classic study of the *Protocols*, historian Norman Cohn summed up the significance of this toxic forgery as follows:

As I see it, the deadliest kind of antisemitism, the kind that results in massacre and attempted genocide, has little to do with real conflicts of interest between living people or even with racial prejudice as such. At its heart lies the belief that Jews—all Jews everywhere—form a conspiratorial body set on ruining and then dominating the rest of mankind.[\[29\]](#)

This is precisely the type of anti-Semitism that was a central aspect of Adolf Hitler's world-view[\[30\]](#) and which has now become a central component of the ideology of the Iranian state.

A vivid example of this Nazi-style anti-Semitic conspiracy thinking is provided by Mehdi Taeb (also spelled Mahdi Tayeb), head of the Ammar Base think tank and advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, who delivered a public address in Iran in 2013 in which he said:

The one thing the Jews want is to take over the entire world . . . They have divided the world into three classes: first-class people, second-class people, and third-class people. The Jews, or the Israelite race, are the first class people. God created the world for them . . . He told them to take over the world. The second-class people are people who do not belong to the Israelite race . . . but who accept the Jews to be first class people . . . They have the right to live, but they must serve the Israelites . . . Who are the third-class people? They are the ones who do not belong to the Israelite people, and do not accept Jewish supremacy . . . What do they deserve? They deserve [to be buried] one meter underground. Therefore, all the Muslims must be killed because they do not accept Jewish supremacy. They must all be killed . . . The only ones who

need an atomic bomb in order to become global are the Jews. ... In order to become global the Jews must kill Muslims *en masse*. In other words, they have to kill 1.4 billion people . . . So they need means of mass killing . . . Do you know who invented the atomic bomb? Einstein . . . [In] the history of world politics, he was one of the most despicable figures. He was a Zionist, a Jew, one of the founders of the state of Israel.[\[31\]](#)

In 2014, Mehdi Taeb also gave a Friday mosque sermon, posted online several times since, in which he said that the Jews are working to block the return of the Hidden Imam, the apocalyptic figure who will usher in the end times according to Shiite doctrine.[\[32\]](#)

Iran's ally, Hezbollah, espouses the same ideology as the Iranian regime. Hezbollah (literally, "The Party of God") is an armed Lebanese Shiite political movement founded in 1982 that has "assimilated the doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran totally and pledged allegiance to its leader, Ayatollah Khomeyni [or Khomeini], and his heir, 'Ali Khamaneh'i [or Khamenei]." [\[33\]](#) For Hezbollah, "The struggle with Israel and the Jews is a total life-or-death war," a modern continuation of the historical struggle between Judaism and Islam dating back to the founding of Islam.[\[34\]](#) According to Hezbollah leaders, "either we destroy Israel or Israel destroys us," [\[35\]](#) "the Jews are the enemy of the entire human race," [\[36\]](#) and "the struggle with the Jews is a struggle for Islamic survival." [\[37\]](#) Hezbollah alludes to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* repeatedly in its propaganda.[\[38\]](#) Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has repeatedly denied Israel's right to exist, threatened to wipe out Israel, and stated in 2002 that "If they [the Jews] all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide." [\[39\]](#)

Holocaust denial is another important aspect of the anti-Semitism of the Iranian regime.[\[40\]](#) Matthias Küntzel explains the significance of Holocaust denial:

To claim that 'Auschwitz' is a myth is to accuse 'the Jews' of deceiving humanity for the past 60 years in pursuit of filthy lucre. To talk of the 'so-called Holocaust' is to imply that over 90% of the world's academic posts and media are controlled by 'the Jews' and are hermetically protected from the 'real' truth. Every denial of the Holocaust therefore implicitly contains within it the demand for its repetition.[\[41\]](#)

The repeated threats of Iranian leaders to obliterate the state of Israel and its people must be understood as natural expressions and logical implications of the demonizing Jew-hatred that is an integral part of the regime's world-view. For example, on December 31, 1999, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated before tens of thousands at a Jerusalem Day rally in Tehran, "There is only one solution to the Middle East Problem, namely the annihilation and destruction of the Zionist state."[\[42\]](#) Another example is the statement by the so-called "moderate" Rafsanjani, who on December 14, 2001 said, "the use of an atomic bomb against Israel would destroy Israel, while [the same] against the Islamic world would only cause damage. Such a scenario is not inconceivable."[\[43\]](#) A recent study of Iranian educational materials found explicit calls for the destruction of Israel in textbooks used in the academic year 2016-17.[\[44\]](#) Dozens more examples of explicit Iranian threats to destroy Israel can be found in this footnote.[\[45\]](#)

Islamic Imperialism

Like the Nazis, the Iranians are driven by an expansionist,

imperialistic ideology. In 1980, the Ayatollah Khomeini announced, "We will export our revolution to the whole world because it is an Islamic revolution . . . The struggle will continue until the calls 'there is no god but God' and 'Muhammad is the messenger of God' are heard all over the world." [46] Some strains of Twelver Shiite theology hold that offensive war to spread Islamic rule is an exclusive right of the infallible Twelfth Imam, who went into hiding in the 9th century and will emerge at the end of time, but the Ayatollah Khomeini did not subscribe to this position. Instead, he held that "the Shiite jurist has all the authorities of the Imam . . ." His successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, agrees, holding that "offensive jihad can be ordered by a qualified jurist . . ." [47] In fact, Mehdi Khalaji, a scholar of Shiite theology, writes that Khamenei holds that "waging war against infidels is completely legitimate." (However, what we would call an offensive war by Muslims against infidels is to Ayatollah Khamenei also a defensive war "because by conquering non-Islamic territories, the ruler of the Islamic country defends the principle of God's unity and Islam." [48])

The current Supreme Leader of Iran is thus an unabashed defender of aggressive Islamic imperialism. In a typical expression of this imperialism, on February 26, 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei's representative in the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, responsible for the IRGC's foreign military and intelligence operations, stated: "We will not rest until we have raised the banner of Islam over the White House." [49] On March 11, 2017, the Commander of the IRGC Ali Ja'fari said, "We are on the path that leads to the rule of Islam worldwide." [50]

The Iranian regime's commitment to an imperialistic foreign policy is enshrined in the Iranian Constitution, which states that " . . . the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps ... will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country,

but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world . . . " The Iranian Constitution also commits Iran "to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community," looks forward to "the establishment of a universal holy government and the downfall of all others," and commits Iran to exporting its Islamic revolution beyond its own borders.[\[51\]](#) The Iranian educational system inculcates this imperialistic mentality in Iranian youth.[\[52\]](#)

Islamic Ethics and Nuclear Weapons

The Shiite Islam of the Iranian regime does not place any serious restrictions on the types of weapons that can be used in the waging of war, nor does it offer much protection to the lives of non-Muslim enemy civilians. Mehdi Khalaji points out: "It is very difficult to find a law in Islam that forbids Muslims from using any kind of weapon against the 'enemies of God.'" [\[53\]](#) Moreover, "in Islamic jurisprudence, the distinction between civilians and combatants is very obscure when it comes to infidels."[\[54\]](#) For example, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of both the powerful Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts[\[55\]](#) and a close advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, said in 2005 that "human beings, apart from Muslims, are animals who roam the earth and engage in corruption."[\[56\]](#) Ayatollah Khomeini taught that "The corrupt in every society should be liquidated . . . The Qur'an teaches us to treat as brothers only those who are Muslims and believe in Allah. [It] teaches us to treat those who are not thus differently; teaches us to hit them, throw them in jail and kill them . . ." [\[57\]](#) (Yet perhaps even Muslim lives did not have great value in Khomeini's eyes, for he taught that martyrdom is "preferable to this miserable life"[\[58\]](#) and he sacrificed over 100,000 children as young as 12 in minefield-clearing operations during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988.[\[59\]](#))

Moreover, Khomeini often invoked the dictum that "the end

justifies the means,” which, Amir Taheri points out, “in Shiite theology is more than a mere motto and can at times be taken as a principle of faith. Once convinced of the rightness of your objective, you are allowed to use practically any means, including murder, to obtain it.”[\[60\]](#) (In Sunni Islamic law also one finds the principle that “necessity excuses one from any rule whatever.”[\[61\]](#)) In the most careful study done to date of the status of enemy non-combatants in the Islamic law of war, the scholar of Islamic law and history Ella Landau Tasseron shows that classical Islamic law gives only very weak and easily overridden protection to the lives of non-Muslim enemy civilians in wartime.[\[62\]](#) Iranian educational materials nowhere teach the impermissibility of nuclear weapons, but on the contrary stress that “Islamic learning [*ma’aref-e eslam*] is such that religious experts can extract from it new laws concerning . . . procurement and use of new weapons, in accordance with the new needs of society . . . ”[\[63\]](#) Eldad Pardo draws the obvious inference: “. . . this description *rules out the possibility of an all-encompassing binding fatwa (religious edict) in matters of weapons*