

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: A CHALLENGE TO STABILITY IN THE GULF

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One about-face follows another as the Islamic Republic of Iran re-shuffles the deck. Yesterday Mahmud Ahmadinejad played the card of appeasement with respect to his nuclear ambitions. Today he swaggers, boasting of new missiles, rockets and satellites.

At the end of January 2010, General Massud Jazayeri, deputy chief of staff of the *Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards), announced that Iran would unveil many new arms projects including missiles to mark the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution at the beginning of February. During the commemoration ceremonies for the 30th anniversary which took place last year, Tehran aroused disquiet among the Western powers by launching its satellite *Omid* with a *Safir-2* rocket, both developed on the basis of Iranian technology. It should be remembered that space launchers and ballistic missiles use shared technologies.

At the beginning of February, the Iranian President presented three new satellite projects, including one intended to provide a military observation platform. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic 'successfully' launched its third space exploration rocket of the *Kavoshgar* variety with an 'experimental capsule' on board carrying some animals. He also unveiled the new booster rocket *Simorgh*, which was almost certainly derived from a North Korean technology, itself inspired by Soviet *Scud*¹ missiles. Minister of Defence Ahmad Vahidi at the same time announced the serial production of anti-helicopter and anti-tank missiles of Iranian design.²

In parallel, Mahmud Ahmadinejad used this celebration to spread unease. He announced '*some good news concerning the production of uranium enriched to 20%*,' an issue at the heart of the war of nerves between Iran and the Western powers. In fact, after having warned on 2 December that Iran would be starting enrichment of uranium to 20%, the Iranian President then said that his country finally '*had no problem with sending [its] enriched uranium abroad*,' before once again taking a step backwards. Mahmud Ahmadinejad's announcement that Iran was going to enrich uranium to 20%, the threshold for military use, then the launch of a medium-range rocket have aroused fear in the international community and accelerated discussions about a possible

¹ http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/02/05/2010020500759.html

² <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/02/06/iran.nuclear/index.html>

hardening of sanctions against Tehran.³ This disquiet was further reinforced by Ahmadinejad's statement which suggests that Iran might even be capable of enriching uranium to 80 %, close to the 90% necessary to make a bomb.⁴

The Arab countries bordering on the Gulf are on the front line and are evidently very anxious about the rise in military power of the regime of the Mullahs. In the face of these fears, their alliance with the United States is being strengthened: Washington is envisaging deployment of a system of anti-missile weapons in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.⁵

1. What does Iran want?

The question people are asking now in Washington and in certain Gulf capitals is: are Iran's efforts simply part of a desire to extend its technical prowess or is it really trying to add another line to its arms programme?

One may dread that the Iranian space, ballistic and nuclear programmes are converging towards the same objective and are aimed at providing the Islamic Republic with a nuclear bomb as well as the means allowing it to deliver nuclear devices.

Iran's first steps in the domain of the space domain are potentially disturbing. While the attention of the world has been focused on its nuclear arms programme, the launches mark the beginning of a new stage in Tehran's growing efforts to control a broad range of sophisticated technologies including rockets and satellites.

Back in 2006, John Sheldon, an expert at the *Centre for Defence and International Security Studies* (CDISS, United Kingdom), said: *'It could be tempting to reject the Iranian efforts as being relatively rudimentary at this stage, but Iran has already proven its persistence and patience, all of which indicates that this country is ready to play a long game to achieve its ambitions.'*⁶ The facts appear to prove him right and one can no longer have doubt about Iran's real objectives.

A report submitted by a parliamentary mission of the French National Assembly in 2008 cites Olivier Caron, a high French official in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who believes that the Iranian missiles with *'2,000 kilometre range'* are *'not interesting for conventional warheads'* and are *'therefore linked to arms of mass destruction.'*⁷

One may also stress that the Iranian race into space, which has been presented as an innocent series of civilian technological successes, can have very major military consequences. Thus, the Simorgh rocket, which was shown off at the beginning of February 2010, can clearly be linked to ICBM⁸ technology and the launches of satellites can indicate a determination to develop ASAT⁹ type armaments.

When touching upon the external aspects of its arms programme, Iran blows hot and cold, alternating between soothing statements about disarmament and the right to nuclear energy followed by direct threats to the Western powers or its Arab neighbours. The government in

³ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2010/01/26/01011-20100126FILWWW00490-iran-des-projets-devoiles-en-fevrier.php>

⁴ <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=132815&d=12&m=2&y=2010>

⁵ <http://english.cctv.com/program/worldwidewatch/20100203/100982.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.armees.com/L-Iran-vise-l-espace-developpement-de-missile,1249.html>

⁷ <http://www.opex360.com/2009/05/22/essai-dun-nouveau-missile-iranien/>

⁸ Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

⁹ Antisatellites. <http://www.spaceflightnow.com/news/n1002/13iran/>

Tehran hides behind a façade of pacifism, but its two-pronged messages are rightly disturbing.

Thus, on the one hand, Mahmud Ahmadinejad said during an interview with Danish television at the end of 2009: *'It is true that the Iranian nation has many enemies, but it does not need a nuclear bomb to defend itself [...].Iran is opposed to atomic weapons and supports nuclear disarmament.'*¹⁰

At the same time, in his appearance at the end of January 2010 in the 19th international conference on the Persian Gulf held in Tehran, Iranian Minister of Defence Ahmad Vahidi¹¹, who was named by Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the autumn of 2009 and comes from the Pasdarans, warned that his country felt it was able to strike Western naval vessels in the Gulf: *'The West knows very well that the vessels deployed in the Gulf constitute an excellent target for Iranian armed forces in case of aggression against the Islamic Republic.'*¹²

This direct threat is also a sign that, more and more, Iran considers the Persian Gulf as its *Mare Nostrum*, relegating the other countries on its shores to a secondary role.

2. A trench is opening up between the coasts of the Gulf

All during the 20th century, Iran and its Arab neighbours maintained a stable but cautious relationship. These circumspect ties rapidly deteriorated after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Neighbours like Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain regularly accuse Tehran of inciting the Shiite segments of their population. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, Saddam Hussein repeated over and over again that he was fighting in the name of the Arab nation against 'Persian expansionism.'¹³

At first, one might believe that the Arab leaders would take a benevolent view of an Iran equipped with a military capability capable of delivering mortal blows against those who would threaten the Muslim world. Indeed, Iran is a nearby country whose anti-Western rhetoric is a big success in the region. Then one recalls that development of nuclear arms by Pakistan in its rivalry with India generated great pride in the Arab countries.

Nevertheless, except for Syria, which is supporting Iran because of a strategic alliance which binds it to the Mullahs, the Arab governments disapprove of the strengthening military capabilities, including nuclear capabilities, going on in Iran.

As proof, during many meetings of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Member States have enjoined Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Secretary General of the GCC Abd Arahman Attiyah said already back in 2005: *'The Iranian nuclear programme has no justification [...]'* ».

In the same order of ideas, in February 2006, Egypt demonstrated that it opposed the Iranian nuclear programme by voting in favour of transferring the Iranian case file from the IAEA to the UN Security Council. The countries of the Maghreb are also relatively hostile to the Iranian regime: it should be recalled that Morocco gave refuge to the Shah after the revolution of 1979, that Algeria and Tunisia have solid economic, political and diplomatic

¹⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5BFOXR20091216>

¹¹ M.Vahidi is sought by Interpol for his alleged involvement in the attack on the Israeli Argentine Mutual Association (AMIA) which caused eighty-five deaths and three hundred injured in Buenos Aires in 1994.

¹² http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=110886

¹³ <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2008/01/20085251949449532.html>

relations with the Gulf and that in 2004 Libya revealed the connections between the Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan and Iran.

Above and beyond the well-known religious origin of the disputes between the Sunni Arabs and Shiite Iran, another disagreement still remains today between Iran and the Arab countries of the Gulf: the delicate question of borders where Iran has demonstrated an aggressive irredentism.

Thus, Iran occupies 3 Arab islands strategically situated at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, islands which the United Arab Emirates still consider to be under their jurisdiction. Moreover, Bahrain is directed by a Sunni regime but the majority of the population is Shiite and it is regularly claimed by Iran as its '14th province.'¹⁴ The present Iraqi government and Tehran also are in complete disagreement over the region of the Shat El Arab, which Baghdad considers to be an integral part of its territory.¹⁵

3. Tehran's double game and the proof which the facts demonstrate

As an unprecedented proof of its duplicity, on 27 January, Tehran, in the person of its President of the Commission on Foreign Affairs and National Security of the Iranian Parliament, Aladdin Borujerdi, confirmed that it was ready to sign security accords with its neighbours. He said on Iranian state television IRIB: *'The Islamic Republic of Iran wishes to have the best possible relations with the countries of the region and we announce that we are ready to ratify bilateral and multilateral accords with them on issues of security.'*

Iran already proposed such accords to the six Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) in order to form a regional diplomatic glacis which would be favourable to it in case of direct military confrontation with the West. So far, it has had no success. Officially, the Iranian argument rested on the notion that regional security must be within the control of the countries of the area and not in the hands of foreign powers.¹⁶

However, in the view of General Petraeus, who heads Centcom (*United States Central Command*) and is responsible for military operations in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in the Middle East, Mahmud Ahmadinejad is *'the best recruiting officer'* for the United States in its determination to strengthen a military partnership with the Arab countries of the region.

Thus, the last 'Manama Dialogue' – a high level military conference bringing together the political and military elite of the Middle East – which was held in Bahrain in December 2009, was focused on the Iranian nuclear programme and on Iran's destabilising role in Iraq, in Afghanistan and now in Yemen.

In fact, Yemen is one of the poorest countries and the most unstable in this troubled region. It presently is inflaming relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours. In November 2009, Shiite rebels launched attacks on Saudi territory, leading to an air strike by Saudi fighter planes on the territory of the Yemeni Shiite rebels. Although the United States officially says that there is no proof of Iranian involvement in these clashes, many Arab countries of the Gulf and Yemen itself are convinced that Tehran is active behind the scenes. Last November Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh confirmed in an interview with *Time Magazine* that the rebels *'were determined to follow the Iranian system.'*¹⁷

¹⁴ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-02/27/content_10912696.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/why-arab-leaders-worry-about-irans-nuclear-program>

¹⁶ http://televisionwashington.com/floater_article1.aspx?lang=en&t=1&id=17480

¹⁷ <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1947740,00.html>

4. If Iran had nuclear arms: what would be the regional consequences?

These consequences are multiple: a direct threat to regional security, the risk of proliferation and, as we sometimes forget, an environmental hazard.

In fact, Iran's 'civilian' nuclear programme relies on Russian technology, which demonstrated its limits in terms of security at Chernobyl. Hence, the location of the future nuclear power plant at Bushehr, several kilometres from the Persian Gulf and closer to six Arab capitals (Kuwait City, Riyadh, Manama, Doha, Abu Dhabi and Muscat) than to Tehran is a source of ecological anxiety. A nuclear accident would be a catastrophe for the neighbouring countries of the Gulf, since the sea is the sole source of drinking water for most of them and, in addition, possible atmospheric contaminants would be dispersed through the entire region.

Furthermore, in order to protect themselves against a possible Iranian atomic weapon, it is probable that certain Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt, will withdraw from the Treaty on Non-Proliferation (TNP) and also seek to equip themselves with bombs. In September 2003, the *Guardian* reported that Saudi Arabia, which had just revised its strategic policies, now included there the acquisition of nuclear arms.

In Egypt as well, the IAEA announced in 2005 that it had found proof that Cairo was carrying out clandestine nuclear experiments suggesting the development of nuclear arms. IAEA inspectors found fissile materials near a nuclear installation, proof that the Egyptians had probably experimented with systems for separating out military grade plutonium. The investigation did not go further and the evidence was not considered to be in violation of the TNP, but it raised certain questions.

Generally speaking, one may believe that the suspect activities of Iran have stimulated the interest of its Arab neighbours in nuclear energy. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates have already sought partners in nuclear matters in the United States, Russia and France in order to master this technology. In keeping with the fact that all these countries belong to the TNP and the IAEA, the acquisition of atomic technology is their 'inalienable right,' but it is possible that this rise in interest is not devoid of ulterior motives. As King Abdallah of Jordan said in 2007: *'The rules on the nuclear issue have changed [...]. Everyone wants to have nuclear programmes [...]. What we don't want is for an arms race to develop from all this.'*

5. Conclusion

Centuries of resentment are feeding the natural distrust of the Arab countries of the Gulf towards Iran and this is only reinforced, and rightly so, by the way that the arms programme and the development of weapons of mass destruction is being conducted with drums beating by the Mullahs and the Pasdaran.

The Arab countries are afraid for their own security and their independence, but they also fear that the Iranian nuclear programme could lead to a military conflict between Tehran and the Western powers. In fact, if Iran refuses to abandon its military nuclear programme and an attack is carried out against these installations, Iranian reprisals could have a major impact on the stability and security of the Arab world. Iran has already proven its ability to be a nuisance in the Mashrek and has moved on to action in Yemen.

In parallel, one must stress that an Iran which is dominant militarily in the region is a threat to hydrocarbon exports, which the countries of the Gulf are very dependent on, and to energy supplies of the whole world given that Tehran has shared control over the Straits of Ormuz, by which half of the oil we consume is exported.

After one of their latest tests of *Shahab III* in September 2009, Hossein Salami, commander of the air force of the Revolutionary Guards, said that '*all targets in the region, wherever they may be located, will be within range of these missiles.*'¹⁸. This is why the countries in the Gulf should be worried: they have everything to lose and nothing to gain from an Iranian hegemony in the area.

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¹⁸ <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4297529>