



# The Concept of Deterrence in Arab and Muslim Thought - Iran

## Working Paper

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Name of Author: Alex Grinberg

Project Leader: Shmuel Bar

## Executive Summary

Iran does not possess a deterrence doctrine similar to that of the US during the Cold War period, and this strategic lacking not likely to change due to ingrained cultural obstacles. The deterrence doctrine referred to herein is an elaborate set of deductions based on an assessment of the country's resources and capacities, and a coherent evaluation of an adversary's faculties and intentions. American political scientists created and expounded deterrence theory during the Cold War, while the USSR did not operate according to any similar theory. The elaboration of such a theory is a highly sophisticated institutional process that requires qualified academic staff, as well as a dialogue between the military and academia. No such elements existed in the USSR, nor do they exist in Iran today. This is yet another "technical" factor preventing Iran from developing its own deterrence theory.

Thus far, Iran does not have a clearly developed conventional doctrine of deterrence. Indeed, the term "deterrence" does exist in Farsi and in the Iranian political discourse; the most prominent term employed which vaguely resembles deterrence is "*bazbarandegi*." However, analysis of open sources in Persian reveals that concrete implications thereof are ambiguous and the word "*defa*" ("defense") frequently accompanies the term. Often, "deterrence" is tantamount to "retaliation." One may suppose that even after having acquired nuclear arms, the Iranian regime will not devise a written doctrine of deterrence; instead, it will likely adopt a

set of political declarations and statements. Such declarations will not likely differ much from those issued recently. It is also plausible that the future Iranian deterrence doctrine will be *reactive* in nature: it may represent menaces and *understating the use of nuclear weapons*, but without a realistic assessment of how all potential rivals might understand this menace. For that purpose, it is unclear whether the Iranian regime will be able to realize that a declared threat addressed to a rival, though they may already possess nuclear capacity, is sharply different from the “usual” exchange of bellicose declarations.

Iran’s current aggressive rhetoric might be ignored, but this will likely change once Iran obtains nuclear capacity as pugnacious declarations, when coupled with a real capacity, must not be treated as mere rhetoric.

The ability to produce a coherent deterrence theory largely depends upon the intelligence scenario both the challenger and the defender draw. There is no clear distinction between collection and assessment bodies within the Iranian intelligence agencies. Moreover, there is a gap between collection capacities and intelligence assessments. The latter is necessarily bound to the ideological posture of the regime, this being an assessment of the USSR and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Chief Iranian intelligence assessment agents would be hard-pressed to introduce viewpoints contrary to the official ideological stances of the regime, and as a result these assessments do not differ from the official propaganda. As such, the Iranian intelligence assessment of their rival’s intentions would plausibly be *globally alarmist and locally unconcerned*. On the one hand, according to the official Iranian ideology, enemies who endlessly hatch plots and conspire against the IRI surround Iran. On the other hand, official propaganda of the regime promotes the idea that “all is well,” claiming that Iranian intelligence agencies are always alert and ready to disrupt any enemy plot. Thus, their insecurity is fed by conspiratorial worldviews and intertwines with their overconfidence in their ability to thwart their enemies. This Iranian mindset will likely lead them to inadequately assess their rival’s intentions and actions which fall outside of their ideological confines.

It is important to analyze the Iranian Shiite Islamic state and their particular religious beliefs. These religious doctrines will influence Iranian deterrence policy as they contribute to the national psyche and underlying cultural patterns of behavior. They will not, however, dictate decisions when it comes to conventional cost-benefit analysis. As the Iranian religious establishment is weak and dependent on the regime, the leading clerics will not be able to exert deep influence on the development of a deterrence doctrine. Furthermore, they will always align their positions with those of the regime. Though the extreme Iranian hard-liners’ rhetoric has an element of irrational religious motivation which could affect their principles of deterrence, it does not exert direct influence on the decision-making process.

Iran has been known to adopt an extremist religious approach, for example in their readiness for self-sacrifice or belief that *Allah* backs their regime and it cannot be deterred. In order to run such a religious regime, however, the leaders must have religious credentials that the current ruling elite do not possess. Thus, Imam Ali visits great ayatollahs with proven spiritual authority but not a president like Ahmadinejad who is devoid of religious authority.

Furthermore, historical evidence does not provide evidence of Iran as an undeterrable, irrational martyr state. Unlike some Jihadi-Salafi texts, classical Shiite texts do not mention any rudimentary indications of a deterrence doctrine. Shi’a influence is not explicit and does not explain their stances through references to

concrete religious texts. However, their implicit worldviews such as their Manichean approach, demonization of their adversaries, and conspiracy theories manifest in inadequate assessments of their adversary's intentions and capacities. As we have seen, while the Iranian leadership might make bad calculations, it is far from suicidal. Coupled with the functionality flaws of the intelligence bodies, Iran's largest vulnerability is a possible miscalculation based on an incorrect assessment of the rival, as opposed to an apocalyptic posture the regime could adopt.

Iran is not irrational, as it does not deliberately ignore the consequences of state action. However, Iran might be unaware of or wrongly assess their adversary's intentions and capacities. Under such circumstances, the risk of a miscalculation and of a gradual escalation is high. Thus, a deterrence strategy must minimize the possibility of Iran misreading its adversaries' intentions.

## Chapter One: Retaliation as deterrence

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Iran does not possess a deterrence doctrine similar to that used by the US during the Cold War. This is unlikely to change due to well ingrained cultural setbacks. The deterrence doctrine referred to henceforth is elaborated detailed set of assessments which rely on an understanding of Iran's resources and capacities as well as a coherent assessment of the adversary's capacities and intentions. Elaboration of such a theory is a highly sophisticated institutional process which requires qualified academic staff as well as a dialogue between the military and academia. None of these factors exist in Iran today. The aforementioned is yet another technical factor that prevents Iran from developing its own deterrence theory, a condition which is unlikely to change.

The Iranian armed forces possess some guiding principles which include an aspect of deterrence. These principles were established and codified in 1992 in the regulations of the Iranian Armed Forces, and stress raising an adversary's risks and costs rather than reducing its own.<sup>1</sup> In all the Iranian documents where "deterrence" is mentioned, it is done so to refer uniquely to conventional weaponry. There is no debate or research on the matter of nuclear deterrence, mainly because these discussions would undermine Iranian credibility.

One of the most distinctive features of the Iranian power structure manifests itself in trumping of informal over formal.<sup>2</sup> This translates itself into the power system by defining a person's real power not by their formal position but by his personal contacts and by being "*khodi*" or in the inner circle. For example, the commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Suleimani, exerts more power than inferred from his formal rank of Brigadier General due to his proven military experience and total loyalty to the Leader Khamenei. The weakness of formality is further expressed in the lacking of long-term planning on most levels. Though Iran has a five-year plan for economic development, it is not used as an obligatory guideline for economic planning. Idem is valid for military planning as well. To that effect, one may add the Iranian attitude towards time, reflected in a

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<sup>1</sup>Steven R. Ward, "*The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine*", Middle East Journal, 59:4 (Autumn 2005), pp.559-576, p.560,567.

<sup>2</sup> *Mullahs, Guards and Buniyads. An Explorations of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, RAND Insitution,p.154 2009

Persian proverb "*chu farda shavad, fekr-e farda konim*" (when tomorrow arrives, we shall think of tomorrow)." We must understand that Iran has a different notion of time, and it is likely to affect their decision-making processes. The development and implementation of a deterrence theory requires capacities of long-term planning capacities which Iran lacks. In addition, the aforementioned domination of personal and informal over impersonal and formal not only spawns general mismanagement but also impacts the application of written road maps and plans. It is because of this that all economic bodies in Iran suffer from mismanagement.<sup>3</sup>

Iranian mismanagement involves not only corruption, but the inability to link a decision and its implementation. As a result, even if Iran were to adopt a formal deterrence doctrine, there is no guarantee that it will be valid once new personnel join the fold. Finally, it is important to realize that regardless of the presence or absence of a formal doctrine, once Iran obtains nuclear weapons it will take some time for them to update their *modus operandi*.

It is noteworthy that the term "deterrence" does in fact exist in Farsi and the Iranian political discourse, as the most precise equivalent of deterrence is "*bazbarandegi*." However, content analysis of open sources in Persian reveals that the concrete implications are ambiguous and mostly are coupled with the word "*deja*" ("defense"<sup>5</sup>). Very often deterrence is tantamount to retaliation. By this token, while reporting about new technological military breakthroughs it allegedly achieved, the Iranian regime emphasizes that their purpose is "defense and deterrence." Moreover, the term deterrence is rarely seen in its own context, namely without relation to conventional defense and reporting about Iranian military strength. It is suggested that even after having acquired nuclear arms, the Iranian regime will not elaborate a written doctrine of deterrence. Instead it will adopt a set of political declarations and statements. These affirmations will likely resemble those which are being peddled today.

It is also plausible that the future Iranian deterrence doctrine will be *reactive* by nature. It may represent menaces by minimizing the use of nuclear weapons without a realistic assessment of how this menace might be understood by its potential rivals. It is highly unclear whether the Iranian regime will realize that a declared threat to a rival, though they may already possess nuclear capacity, is sharply different from the "usual" exchange of bellicose declarations<sup>6</sup>. The risk of gradual escalation will increase if the Iranian regime resorts to its usual threats of retaliation while positioning its nuclear capacity. Any of Iran's rivals, be it the US or Israel, will not be able to disregard such combative rhetoric as Iranian declarations will be fostered by their existing nuclear weapons. Iranian adversaries' reaction to such menacing rhetoric, combined with their functional nuclear capacity, could usher in a DEFCON1 declaration, which in its turn would alert Iran. Thus, the risk of escalation increases.

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3 Genevieve Abdo, "On the sidelines of Iran's election," 29Feb. 2012, *insideiran.org*, <http://www.insideiran.org/news/on-the-sidelines-of-irans-election/>

<sup>5</sup>Iranian Navy commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari stated that "Iran has repeatedly offered reassurances that its military might poses no threat to other countries, insisting that its defense doctrine is solely based on deterrence" (BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, December 4, 2011 Sunday).

<sup>6</sup> "Iran's Ambassador to Lebanon Ghazanfar Roknabadi said that Iran has 11,000 rockets ready to fire at the USA and Israel, as well as at their facilities across the world," Mehr News Agency (10 Mar. 2012) (via BBC Monitoring).

## Chapter Two: Lack of coherent intelligence assessment and information streaming as a hindrance to introduce a deterrence doctrine

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Naturally, an ability to compose a coherent deterrence theory depends largely upon the intelligence picture that both the challenger and the defender draw. Any deterrence doctrine that is implicated and state-tailored must consider the concrete intelligence estimate on their rival. Within Iranian intelligence agencies there is no clear distinction between collection and assessment bodies. Moreover, there is a gap between collection capacities and intelligence assessment. The latter is constantly bound to the ideological posture of the regime.

As a result, those charged with creating an assessment doctrine do not dare to introduce viewpoints which contradict the regime's ideology. In other words, intelligence assessments do not differ from the official propaganda. This assumption is not limited to speculations on Iranian political culture; it relies on concrete examples from the Soviet assessment during the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> It is plausible to assume that an Iranian intelligence assessment of their rival's intentions would be globally alarmist and locally unmoved. On the one hand, official Iranian ideology claims that their enemies endlessly hatch plots, conspire against them, and completely surround them.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, official regime propaganda pushes an "all is well" agenda, arguing that Iranian intelligence agencies will disrupt all of their enemies' plots.<sup>9</sup> Thus, insecurity which is fed by conspiracy is intertwined with overconfidence in their ability to thwart enemy designs. This mindset is likely to result in Iran underestimating and poorly assessing their rival's intentions and moves which span beyond their ideological clichés.

An additional factor which weighs heavily on the decision making process is information streaming, which is linked to the knowledge of relevant facts. The results of the process and its "rationality" depend upon the speed and the quality of information the leader receives. It is Khamenei who has the last word in the Iranian decision-making process, yet he is surrounded by advisers and gatekeepers who are responsible for the information that is channeled to him. Khamenei does not know English, which prevents him from gleaning information from the source. He therefore depends heavily on the gatekeepers in his office (*daftar-e rahbari*) who filter the stream of information<sup>10</sup>. This highlights the likelihood that Khamenei may not have access to the information necessary for making a rational decision.

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Andrew, "The previous history of all authoritarian regimes should have been sufficient to demonstrate that Soviet political intelligence assessment was bound to be bad.", *Intelligence analysis needs to look backwards before looking forward* <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-23.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Iran official urges vigilance to counter enemy "plots", ISNA December 28, 2011 (via BBC Worldwide Monitoring); "Iranian Intelligence Minister Heydar Moselehi has said that the enemy has devised plots to undermine Iranian industrial organizations at this critical juncture, but passive defence can thwart these plots. He made the remarks in an address to the Fourth National Seminar on the Basij and Passive Defence, which was held in Tehran on Monday", Mehr news agency, November 28, 2011 (via BBC Worldwide monitoring); "Ayatollah Khatami listed 10 types of plots that America and Israel have resorted to against Iran during the past 32 years", Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network, 0522gmt 07 Nov 11 (via BBC Worldwide Monitoring).

<sup>9</sup> "Iranian intelligence minister comments on spies, plots, conspiracies... The intelligence minister has said: We have a full oversight of people who have been duped and have fallen into step with the enemy. According to the government's news website, Hojjat ol-Eslam Heydar Moselehi, speaking to reporters on the sidelines of today's cabinet meeting, added: We will provide good information in this respect soon. He said: Most of America and Mossad's ploys for recruiting some individuals in Iran has been foiled and the duped individuals have been arrested," Fars News Agency, 27 Nov. 2011 (via BBC Worldwide Monitoring).

<sup>10</sup> Shmuel Bar, *Iranian Signaling and Decision Making*, Institute for Policy and Strategy, 1 November 2006, p. 21.

## Chapter Three: How Iranian Shi'a affect Deterrence

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Given that Iran defines itself as a religious state, it is likely that the Iranian Shi'a exercise influence over the future of an Iranian deterrence doctrine. There is a tendency to consider religiously-motivated adversaries as difficult to deter as their cost-benefit calculations are grounded in their religious beliefs, and hence irresponsive to their adversary's threats. Under such circumstances, their calculations are two-toned: on the one hand their cost-benefit analysis may differ completely from their western secular counterparts, yet on the other hand, Iran is a state with grounded geopolitical interests. To properly precisely assess Iranian deterrent behavior we must consider all possible, even initially contradictory, factors.

Shiite theology makes no explicit references to deterrence – at least not in the sense that could be extrapolated to state behavioral patterns. As Iranian history 1979 onwards reveals, Shiite theology and law serve only as a posteriori justification for already taken actions. The mere principle of *the Vilayat - e faqih* (as established by Khomeini) postulates that it is the Jurist (*vali-ye faqih*) who decides what contradicts or is compatible with Islam. These decisions are based on the interests of Islam, which are tightly associated with those of Iran. Therefore, a ruling jurist has the authority to overrule Islamic law if it is necessary to safeguard the regime<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, Iran is free to develop a deterrence doctrine, as it would not face problems of being contradictory to the tenets of Islam - mostly because there are no bounding legalistic texts.

The belief in the *Mahdi* and its associated "apocalyptic" repercussions do not necessarily result in intentional risk-taking, yet it does enhance the plausibility of a miscalculation. According to this vision Iran is always a victim and its foes are always the aggressors. They are depicted as *Shemr* and *Yazid* (if they are Muslim) or Big/Small Satan (if they are the US, the UK, or Israel). A concrete influence will affect the further understanding of their adversary's intentions. The Manichean worldview is optimal for breeding conspiracy theories, and leaves no room for the assessment of the adversary as a rational actor. Any rival move is viewed either as another conspiracy or a defeat imposed by Iran. This approach does not allow for the possibility that the adversary may miscalculate or that there are nuances in their behavior<sup>12</sup>. This Manichean standpoint towards adversaries prevents the development of multi-functional deterrence policies. Instead of adopting several principles of deterrence that vary and have different patterns (such as "massive retaliation," "extended deterrence" or "flexible response,"), Iran will probably adopt rabble-raising rhetoric to address their adversaries<sup>13</sup>. *Therefore the Iranian regime will not be aware of how their adversaries perceive their rhetoric as signals.*

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<sup>11</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics. On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008, p.27.

<sup>12</sup> As noted further, when trying to assess the US' intentions, Iranian analysts seem to misunderstand not only their intentions but also mechanisms of the American decision-making process.

<sup>13</sup> One of the IRGC commanders declared that if "attacked, Iran will bring the war to the streets of Tel-Aviv" Farsnews, 11Jul.2011, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007272610>

Iranian society is prone to conspiracy belief. What makes the Iranian case very specific is not conspiracy theories, but the fact the well-educated intellectuals and influential politicians lend credence to them<sup>14</sup>. According to the conspiracy vision, Iran is always a victim of foreign plots against them. This victimhood is enhanced by Shiite theology that promotes the total good of Shiite Iran and the total evil of its foes. This victim self-perception results in two consequences which exert influence on deterrence doctrine:

1. Rejection of compromise. Compromise is incompatible with the principles of their zero-sum game; they cannot allow a win-win situation with their evil enemies. Naturally, deterrence theories are based, if not upon compromise, at least upon mutual understanding and communication.
2. Slurred distinction between “defensive” and “offensive” measures. Iran insists on describing its actions as defensive. Iran defends itself regardless of how their concrete actions might be perceived by their rivals. This contradicts the principle of aligning with mutually accepted red lines – which both challengers and defenders accept – in order to prevent an uncontrolled escalation of events.

Below is an excerpt from an article by Maqsd Ranjabr entitled “The threats of Israel on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, which was published in the Iranian journal “*Andishe-ye enghelab-e eslami*” (Thought of the Islamic Revolution)<sup>15</sup>. This analytical article’s style differs from the usual Iranian media reports which concern the issue in question. The article is devoid of rabble-rousing rhetoric, yet still permeated with the ruling ideology in Iran. This allows for an understanding of the extent to which conspiracy theories and demonization of the adversary are rooted in Iranian assessment.

*“Threats from Israel on the national security of the IRI stem from the ideological and intellectual opposition. This mutual opposition is perennial. Only a form of the threat might change depending on changing regional and international conditions. The threats also might have different aspects if economic, international and regional circumstances change in each of the two countries. Given this aspect, the war between Iran and Israel is a war between two historical conflicting idealists<sup>16</sup>. This war is about being or not being of each of the sides... On this basis, Israel predicates its existence on non-existence of the IRI. Iran also identifies its existence with the non-existence of Israel. In light of this one can conclude that Israel is the most essential foe of the Islamic Revolution and the Regime of the Islamic Republic.”<sup>17</sup>*

It is noteworthy to remark that Shiite theology and the Shiite religious establishment of Iran will play only a marginal role in the development of a deterrence doctrine. As mentioned beforehand, there are no references to the issue of deterrence in classical Shiite texts. Moreover, given that the official stance of Iran refers to nuclear arms as forbidden by Islam, there is no clerical discourse about the nuclear issue. The only cleric to raise the issue was Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, who wrote that “Iran should not deprive itself of the right to

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<sup>14</sup> Houshang E. Chehabi, “The Paranoid Style in Iranian Historiography” pp.155-177 in Touraj Atabaki (ed.), *Iran in the 20th Century - Historiography and Political Culture*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, p.156.

<sup>15</sup> Maqsd Ranjabr, “tahdidat-e esra’il aleyhe amniyat-e melli-ye jumhuri-ye eslami-ye iran”, *andishe-ye enghelab-e eslami*, v.6, 1382 (2003), pp.234-256.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp.235, in original “armangera”.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

produce these “special weapons”<sup>18</sup>. Yazdi’s disciple, Mohsen Gharavian, was even more outspoken, as he stated that it is “only natural” to have nuclear bombs as a “countermeasure” against other nuclear powers<sup>19</sup>. However, Mesbah-Yazdi and Gharaviyan are more politicians and hard-core ideologues than high-ranking, widely accepted pious clerics. A passage referring to nuclear weapons as a taboo issue to justify nuclear deterrence would require a room for theological maneuvers. This, in its turn, is feasible and does not represent a serious problem thanks to the built-in flexibility of the Shiite law.

The principle of *Taqiyya* (religious dissimulation) allows the representation of new principles concerning the nuclear issue, in contrast to the previous statements forbidding production and use thereof. Shiite Islam regards religious dissimulation as legal in situations where there is danger of loss of life or property, on the condition that mental reservation is maintained.<sup>20</sup> The concept of danger might be widened for the interests of the Islamic Republic, thus the possession and use of nuclear arms could be justified. Finally, given that the religious establishment is wholly dependent upon the state; its potential reference to the nuclear issue will most definitely align with the official discourse. Dissenting voices of the most influential ayatollahs are hardly imaginable.

There is another principle that facilitates possible theological maneuvers. The principle of *maslaha* (interest) is common to both Shiite and Sunnis. This concept means that actions can be taken which are contradictory to Islam in order to achieve larger goals in the interest of Islam. Similarly, interests change with circumstances, and what was forbidden yesterday can be permitted today. Putting it clearly, Fazal Mibudi, a cleric from Qum, said “There is room for maneuver in Islam. Things can be *haram* (forbidden) one day and *halal* (acceptable) later on. But this takes time.”<sup>21</sup>

Numerous speculations have been made whether or not Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (religious verdict) prohibiting nuclear weapons, yet documentation of such a fatwa has not been found. It seems strange that all other fatwas released by Khomeini can be easily found, yet the nuclear one remains elusive. This absence is important because any clerical nuclear discourse that develops would not contradict the tenets of Islam. Had Khomeini’s fatwa existed, it would have been more difficult to maneuver as it would require directly contradicting Khomeini.

The religious establishment has no real power in Iran; it merely serves as a rubber stamp for the regime. Over the years, the Supreme Leader Khamenei did his best to undermine the independence of the religious establishment, so that all high-ranking clerics in Qum financially depend on the state,<sup>22</sup> contrary to the

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<sup>18</sup> “Cleric Says Iran Should Produce Nuclear Arms”, *New-York Times*, 15/06/2010

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/world/middleeast/15Iran.html>

<sup>19</sup> Vick, Karl. “Iran’s Gray Area on Nuclear Arms.” *The Washington Post*. 21 June 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/20/AR2006062001584.html>

<sup>20</sup> Moojan Moomen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, p.183, Yale University Press, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Collier, Robert, “Nuclear weapons unholy, Iran says Islam forbids use, clerics proclaim”, *San-Francisco Chronicle*, 10/23/2003.

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/10/31/MNGHJ2NFRE1.DTL>

<sup>22</sup> The terms “clerics” and “ayatollahs” used in the present paper apply only to traditional high-ranking ayatollahs of Qom, Mashad, or Najaf whose rank is due to their traditional religious credentials. This is for the sake of distinction between them and Iranian politicians having religious formation but who are primarily politicians like Khamenei, Rafsanjani, or Mesbah Yazdi (though these three are referred to as “ayatollah”).



historical past when sources-of-emulation (*maraje-e taqlid*) were financially independent.<sup>23</sup> With the exception of the deceased Ayatollah Montazeri, no leading *maraje* dared contradict Khamenei's official ideology of the Iranian regime.

In light of these circumstances, it is highly improbable that an Iranian deterrence doctrine will have a considerable theological background. For that purpose, it is important differentiate between theology or theological discourse and ideology and ideological discourse, in terms of its possible implementation into a future deterrence theory. Theology refers to discourse, be it written or oral, highly based on the traditional religious texts such as the Quran, Hadith, and legal tractates. Ideology may be defined as a set of articulated, essentially political slogans and statements, but not necessarily fused with religious terminology. The second category of discourse is currently prevalent in Iran. Though emotional rhetoric does mention Islamic terms, they are minor in comparison with slogans that are more progressive. For instance Khamenei's recent speeches included both traditional Islamic slogans and scientific, progressive slogans on national production and economic jihad<sup>24</sup>.

An ideological discourse of this kind is likely to be more flexible in terms of adjusting itself to changing circumstances, particularly because it is not bound to concrete religious texts. This is why an Iranian deterrence theory will not depend strictly upon Shiite classical religious worldviews.

One of the main difficulties religion creates in regards to deterrence is that a religiously motivated adversary is likely to be irresponsive to normal or Western cost-benefit calculations. This theory posits that harm to the civil populace of Iran cannot prevent them from the use of its nuclear arsenal, as it could deter both the US and the USSR, though not to the same extent. In other words, Iran is an undeterrable martyr state which is frighteningly tolerant of casualties.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Iranian leadership might consider death by martyrdom a desirable fate. A religiously driven challenger seems to be more prepared for sacrifice for the sake in the name of the cause.<sup>26</sup> This aspect is clear as far as the jihadi-Salafists are concerned. They argue that they love death more than life and, at least on the declarative level, they are difficult to deter using classical methods of the deterrence theory. The picture is different in Iran. Iran gained the reputation of a martyrdom-seeking nation mainly in the aftermath of two events. The first would be Iranian inspired and led Hezbollah who was the first to utilize a suicide attack against the IDF in Tyr, Lebanon on November 4, 1983. The second instance that created the image of Iran as an irrational martyrdom seeker was when they sent children to Iraqi minefields during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). However, there is no documented evidence that Iranian authorities regularly sent

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<sup>23</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shi'a*, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2006 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Supreme Leader's Norouz message, 20/03/2012 [http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1611](http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1611);  
<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=18923>

<sup>25</sup> This assessment of Iran is drawn in the following papers: Shimon Shapira and Daniel Diker, "Iran's Second Islamic Revolution," in *Iran's Race for Regional Supremacy: Strategic Implications for the Middle East*. (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs): 44. See also Michael Rubin, "Can a Nuclear Iran Be Contained or Deterred?," American Enterprise Institute, November 2008, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/28896> (arguing that Ahmadinejad and his regime cronies believe they could hasten Mahdi's return "by precipitating violence, setting the stage for the return as prophesied in some readings of Islamic texts"); Yossi Melman and Meir Jevadenfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007). The references are cited from "Is Iran a Martyr State?" by Andrew Grotto, *Brown Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 2009 pp.45-59.

<sup>26</sup> The readiness to self sacrifice amid the jihadists is not self-evident, contrary to their declared stance. Usually, the main ideologues of suicide attacks abstain from sending their own off-spring to perpetrate suicide attacks.

children with the clear objective of martyrdom. The adolescents who blew themselves up on the Iraqi minefields were represented as martyrs by the Iranian official media. However, their goal was clearly to achieve a breakthrough through the minefields, not seeking death in order to frighten the enemy as is done nowadays by Sunni jihadists. Most probably, the adolescents simply took part in the fighting alongside the adults.

Martyrs mentioned in the official Iranian rhetoric are soldiers who died in battle against the Iraqi army, and thus the term martyr has more to do with the commemoration of fallen soldiers than with cults of martyrs. The official term used in Iranian media is martyrs of the imposed war (*shuhada-e jang-e tahmil*).<sup>27</sup>

From the historical vantage point, the roots of martyrdom for Shiite Iranians lie in the myth of the Imam Hussein's death. The Umayyad army butchered Ali's son Hussein and his companions on the day of 10<sup>th</sup> Muharram, AH 61 (10 October 680), which is known as *Ashura*. Since then, the horrific death of Hussein symbolizes tragedy and injustice. The martyrdom of Hussein created the characteristic traits of Shiite Islam.<sup>28</sup> Hussein's death became the minority's embodiment of self-sacrifice and struggle against outnumbering evil powers. This example includes the characteristic and duty of waiting for justice in the future, thereby fitting the *modus vivendi* of the Shiite community as an oppressed minority forced to endure a great amount of suffering.

This traditional pattern has existed for centuries. In the 1970's, some Iranian clerics raised a question regarding Hussein's martyrdom, particularly its rationality. If Hussein was the Imam, gifted with divine knowledge, he should have realized that his engagement with the Umayyad army would only bring utter defeat. If this is the case, why did he pursue the battle? A cleric from Isphahan, Najaf Abady, wrote a book "The Eternal Martyr" where he argued that Hussein had done everything to win the battle. The defeat was due to the shortage of necessary information. The book raised harsh criticism amid the clergy because it implies doubt of Hussein's divine knowledge<sup>29</sup>. This book can be considered as the first step towards the rationalization of Hussein's image. The next move was the writings of the Western-educated thinker and sociologist Ali Shariati, who completely reshaped the Shiite's founding myth. According to Shariati, Ali's goal was fighting for justice against unjust power. He died not because of an unsuccessful military operation but because his exploit must serve as testimony (which is the original meaning of the word *shahadat*) of eternal struggle. Shariati's interpretation shifts accents within the myth and emphasizes the dimension of active struggle against the injustice. This new understanding of martyrdom was concomitant with the 1979 Islamic Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war.

However, both the traditional and modern interpretations of martyrdom do not imply any aspects of the current Sunni jihadi elements of martyrdom discourse, which could be related to deterrence. As mentioned above, the martyrdom evoked in the Iranian official discourse refers to what might be described as universal military or civil courage, never as premeditated suicide attacks against enemies. Moreover, even though Iran approves "any nations and any groups fighting Israel"<sup>30</sup>, it banned suicide volunteers from traveling to Palestinian territories during the Cast Lead operation in 2009. Khamenei declared that Iran "will spare no

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<sup>27</sup> "The IRGC commander of Shahrkard: martyrs of the imposed war secured the Islamic revolution", Fars news agency, 25/10/2011  
<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13900703001318>

<sup>28</sup> Moomen, p.33.

<sup>29</sup> Yann Richard, *L'islam Chiite. Croyances et ideologies*, Paris, 1991; p.49.

<sup>30</sup> "Khamenei: Iran will back 'any nations, any groups' fighting Israel", Washington Post, 3 Feb.,

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iran-says-it-launched-satellite/2012/02/03/g!QARNuDmQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-says-it-launched-satellite/2012/02/03/g!QARNuDmQ_story.html)

efforts to support Hamas but its hands are tied”<sup>31</sup>. In addition, it is noteworthy to mention that since the first suicide attacks in Lebanon, the perpetrators have not been Iranian citizens. Thus far, Iran contents with financial and moral support of Islamist groups carrying out suicide attacks, but at the same time, Iran avoids direct involvement.

The only clear reference to martyrdom as deterrent factor is that by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, who is believed to be the spiritual mentor of President Ahmadinejad, and who constitutes the extreme fringe of Iranian hardliners. In one of his books, Mesbah Yazdi explicitly formulates some principles of warfare that could easily be considered irrational, as they clearly fit the bill of a challenger ignoring usual cost-benefit calculus.

*“The strong and impeccable logic of believers is that we cannot be defeated in a war against polytheists, heretics, oppressors, and mischief makers, because either we get killed and then we go to paradise and this itself is a great victory, or we bring enemies of God and Islam to their knees, is also another big victory. From this point view, the war in any form will be in our favor.”*<sup>32</sup>

Such a train of thought, if adopted as a nationwide official strategy, impedes deterrence signals because it discards the effect of retaliation and damage, since death is considered a form of victory. Mesbah Yazdi, along with President Ahmadinejad, is said to be for promoting apocalyptic, messianic, and irrational trends in Iran, which are potentially irresponsive to any deterrence tactic. Mesbah Yazdi postulates that violent jihad should be “waged for defense of religious and human values.”<sup>33</sup> As to Ahmadinejad’s assertions of communication with the Hidden Imam, they have deterrence related dimension. Thus Ahmadinejad, or any other future high-ranking Iranian leader, emboldens Iran’s image as a divinely guided state. Allegedly, a religious leader claiming to have communicated with divinity presupposes infallibility and, therefore, his monopoly in decision making. The implication for the subjects, including the military command, is clear: it means unquestionable unaccountability of the leader, as obeying the leader is tantamount to obedience to God.

Blind obedience to what is seen as divine will, articulated by the leader will compel battle, even with a superior opponent. For instance, Iranian leadership might refer to its nuclear arsenal as a divine gift and discard the US or Israeli nuclear superiority. Firm religious conviction, coupled with over confidence in Iranian weaponry, might drive an aggressive stance resulting in the discard of deterrence signals and communications. If such a stance is divinely sanctioned, it renders communication with a rival irrelevant. However, some existing Iranian ideological will hinder this scenario from unfolding. The current Iranian rhetoric is not purely theological in the sense that most Iranian officials conflate divine involvement with successes of Iran in various fields, be they military or economic. In other words, the Iranian regime is unlikely to articulate a religious discourse wherein direct a priori divine involvement is promised to bring victory. The most plausible outcome is that the religious rhetoric will accompany boasting of Iranian capacities. The domestic Iranian coverage of military achievements has two outstanding characteristics that differ from the Soviet coverage. Soviet media usually abstained from or reported selectively about military technological achievements. By contrast, Iran not only publicly reports its

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<sup>31</sup> “Khamenei bans suicide volunteer bombers travel to Israel”, Haaretz, 08.01.09 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/iran-bans-volunteer-suicide-bombers-from-traveling-to-israel-1.267736>

<sup>32</sup> Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, *Jang va-jehad dar Qoran* (War and Jihad in the Qur’an), Qom, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Ali Rahnema, *Superstition As Ideology in Iranian Politics: From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p.95.

technology as it empowers the image of Iran's military strength, but it also embellishes non-existing technological breakthroughs.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, new Iranian weapons are systematically represented as state-of-the-art, the most advanced, etc.<sup>35</sup>:

*"This missile is an air defense missile. It is a mid-range missile and of course, it can also act as a short-range missile. It benefits from very high capabilities. It is very fast, with a speed of about three mach. It has a high capability of collision with targets. It is resistant against enemies' jamming and electronic warfare. And it is equipped with the world's most modern technologies. This missile can be launched by Mersad system, which is also a domestic production. The missile is of a mid-range of about more than 40 kilometers, and hopefully, in its future versions this range will be increased. We can say that it benefits from more advanced, up-to-date, and more prepared technology compared to its foreign similar versions. Thank to God, we can say that we are totally self-sufficient in the field of short and mid-range air defense. And we will provide all the parts required for our long-range air defense projects."*<sup>36</sup>

Religious zeal combined with self-confident missile retaliation capacity may exacerbate brinkmanship.<sup>37</sup> In light of the Iran's recent history, the probability of hard-core religious behavior is low. Here, hard-core means a religious stance that includes a combination of features, such as divinely sanctioned infallibility of the leader and justification of irresponsiveness to deterrent threats by communication with God. Such a religious mode prevails over a religiously tainted ideology.

The difference between hard-core religious motivation and a religiously tainted ideology would manifest itself in the reaction to deterrent signals. A religious political ideology is more likely to lead to a simple miscalculation of the deterrent's intentions and actions, whereas a leader claiming to receive divine orders is more prone to adopt one of two mutually exclusive options. On the one hand, he might be more inclined to ignore deterrence signals because his claim to be in contact with God renders ignoring of the signals easier. In that case, the irrationality is clear in the sense that a leader whose behavior fits this religious mentality can openly discard physical calculations of balance of power, being confident in divine power. On the other hand, the same religious zeal might paradoxically make the leader choose moderation or better communication with adversaries, precisely because the leader of this kind does not need to justify his choices to the public: if he communicates with God, he surely knows what is best.

The Iranian religious-political leadership does not fit this pattern. To be sure, there is a theological dimension in the Supreme Leader Khamenei's cult of personality, or in President Ahmadinejad's contacts with the Hidden

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<sup>34</sup> "Altered images: Iran launch photos 'doctored'", The Guardian, 11/07/2008.

<sup>35</sup> "Iran designing radar system able to counter cruise missiles", Mehr, 19/09/2011 (via BBC monitoring); "Iran's long-range missiles cannot be affected by NATO shield", IRNA 25/09/2011 (via BBC monitoring)

<sup>36</sup> Defence and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Ahmad Vahidi elaborating on the Shalamcheh surface-to-air mid-range missile, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, in Persian 0930 gmt 4 Sep 11 (via BBC monitoring)

<sup>37</sup> "Speaking about threats coming from Europe, Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Air Force Commander-in-Chief Brig-Gen Amir Ali Hajizadeh said: "Our missile range is 2,000 kilometres and our trans-regional enemies are America and Israel. We do not feel any threat from other countries. As a result, the range of our missiles is designed so as to target the American facilities in the region and Israel.", Mehr News Agency, 28/06/2011(via BBC Monitoring)

Imam. However, a further analysis is required in order to put these two phenomena in a concrete context. Their detailed comprehension leads one to consider this scenario as the least probable.

Over the recent years it was the particularly messianic pretensions of Ahmadinejad and extremely aggressive statements of Misbah Yazdi which enhanced Iran's reputation as fanatic, irrational and irresponsible to deterrence. Ahmadinejad has reported relations with the *Hujatiya* movement, who is believed to hold messianic apocalyptic beliefs. The movement believes in the return of the Hidden Imam, whose coming is predicted at a time of injustice. True Islamic rule, according to this worldview, is possible only upon the *Mahdi's* return<sup>38</sup>. A religious zeal of this kind, if shared by political leadership, is often viewed as having immediate implications for deterrence. If the *Mahdi's* advent can be hastened by world chaos, Iran can hasten the process, wreaking havoc. In that case, Iran will actively seek confrontation instead of trying to decrease tensions. One can hardly imagine any strategy that would be able to deter an adversary who actively seeks confrontation simply because he sticks to the principle the worse the better.

Indeed, the most troubling development that would have catastrophic implications for deterrence would be the adoption of the violent messianic apocalyptic belief by mainstream Iranian leadership. However, there are several obstacles that impede this creed from becoming an officially bounding doctrine:

1. The only clearly documented fact concerning the *Hujatiyya* society is that it was established with the goal to fight Baha'ism<sup>39</sup>. All other details, ranging from the belief in hastening of the *Mahdi's* advent to Ahmadinejad's personal links with the movement, are not supported by clear cut evidence, though they cannot be discarded as pure allegations either.
2. Neither Khamenei nor Ahmadinejad justify political moves of Iran by their personal communication with unnatural divine forces. Naturally, everything the regime carries out is thanks to God, but the Iranian leadership does not make irrational decisions while justifying them in advance by their divine infallibility. If any historical analogy can be drawn in order to emphasize the subtleties of religious beliefs in the service of the state, it can be found in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Iran. In the Battle of Chaldiran (August 23, 1514) the Ottoman Sultan Selim I defeated the Iranian Safavi Shah Esmail. The Shah Esmail's cavalry Qizilbash was highly outnumbered by the Ottoman Janissaries let alone the latter's firearms and canons. The Qizilbash refused to use firearms because they viewed them with contempt as less manly than traditional swords.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Esmail was confident in his own invincibility sanctioned by God.<sup>41</sup> Compared with modern-day Iran barely any similarities can be found, since no one within the Iranian leadership evokes its own invincibility in these terms, overtly discarding the US military and technological superiority.
3. Undoubtedly Ahmadinejad does firmly believe in his own religious statements, as they don't provide him any political benefit, thereby ruling out cynical use of religious beliefs of the common folk for personal political profit. This view is exacerbated especially now, when Ahmadinejad's status is challenged in the aftermath of the harsh rift between him and the Supreme Leader Khamenei. The

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<sup>38</sup> Sanam Vakil, "Iran", in *Militancy and Political Violence in Shiism*, Assaf Moghadam (ed), Routledge, 2011, pp 83-84.

<sup>39</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, I.B Tauris, 2009, pp.223-225.

<sup>40</sup> Kaveh Farrokh, *Iran at War*, Osprey, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> The Cambridge history of Iran, By William Bayne Fisher, Peter Jackson, Laurence Lockhart, p. 359.,Cambridge University Press, 1986.

bitter hostility between the president, clergy, and parliament enforce the estimate that the issue in question is by no means a cynical use of religious beliefs for the sake of political profit. Moreover, the claim to communication with the Hidden Imam is primarily defiance towards the Supreme Leader and the superior clergy, because the latter sees Ahmadinejad's claims as an encroachment on its monopoly of the religious sphere.<sup>42</sup> Nor is Ahmadinejad a cleric whose pious religious credentials would theoretically justify such pretensions.

4. Another important, and usually ignored, nuance of Ahmadinejad's belief consists in the fact that he has never articulated any causality between his messianic slogans and concrete actions that Iran should or will undertake. Even if the allegations concerning Ahmadinejad's affiliation with *Hujatiyya* and the latter's belief that the advent of the Hidden Imam can be hastened by chaos are true, Ahmadinejad has never uttered that his concrete intention is to sow chaos in order to hasten the Imam's coming.
5. One cannot mention the special relationship between Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi in view of the recent developments within the Iranian regime. As a result of his rift with the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad has no serious leverage in Iranian politics or foreign relations, which remain in Khamenei's monopoly. As to Mesbah Yazdi, he leads a hardline fraction of the principlists (*usulgerayan*) in the parliament. The latter did his best to distance himself from the president, and thus the tandem between Ahmadinejad and Mesbah Yazdi no longer exists.
6. The perspective of a hard-core, religiously motivated Iranian leadership succeeding the current one seems is even less probable. For the moment, there is no estimate on who Khamenei's successor might be, for the regime is extremely secretive to the point that even speculations can hardly be found in the media. One may assume that whoever claims to be divinely inspired must have religious, spiritual, scholarly, or political credentials in order for his claims to be credible and accepted by his target public. Additionally the candidate is ought to have personal charisma. There is no such a person in the ranks of the Iranian elite who is close to the Supreme leader. The most plausible outcome is that Khamenei's successor will not be a new supreme leader, in the sense that Khamenei is now, but someone who must first consolidate his power, much like Khamenei did after Khomeini's death.<sup>43</sup> One may safely assume that the successor will not be a traditional *ayatollah*, because all the living *marja's* are too old or aloof of the current politics. Given these constraints, it is hardly imaginable that a lay politician without political experience or religious credentials will try to emulate Ahmadinejad's religious stance. The processes such as gaining necessary political experience, religious credentials, and personal charisma cannot be procured immediately and will require at least several years following the nomination of a new leader.

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<sup>42</sup> Ali Alfoneh, Ahmadinejad versus the clergy, AEI on line <http://www.aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/ahmadinejad-versus-the-clergy/>

<sup>43</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, *Who will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran*, Policy Focus # 117/February 2012, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy?.

## Chapter Four: Is Iran Rational?

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Numerous deterrence research projects discuss the issue of rationality, and any assessment of Iranian intentions entails the question of whether or not Iran is rational. There is a tendency to perceive Iranian actions either as offensive and expansionist, or as defensive.<sup>44</sup> The dichotomist distinction between defensive and offensive or hegemonic goals in terms of Iran is misleading. Usually, common wisdom argues that the goal of Iranian nuclear arms is restricted to clearly defensive purposes, such as regime invulnerability, which decreases its readability to risk-takings. The problem is that the regime does not distinguish between defense and Iranian hegemony. According to the regime's worldview, which has roots in Shiite theology, Iran is constantly under attack; therefore everything Iran does to fight them is only a defense.<sup>45</sup>

For the sake of methodology, a clear definition of rationality and irrationality must be set. Irrationality can be understood as not stopping to think about the consequences of what is going on. The direct implication of such an understanding of irrationality would mean that Iran could decide to suddenly use its nuclear arsenal against Israel without taking into consideration further consequences thereof. However, this simplistic estimate is lowly probable as recent Iranian history proves the contrary. As we see, even when Iranian officials treat Israel as "cancer", they never say that it will be Iran who will be charged with dealing with it<sup>46</sup>. No Iranian military official has said that the Hidden Imam or God would help Iran no matter what it does. The latter doesn't fit the apocalyptic thinking that is often ascribed to the Iranian leadership.

For the same reason, pragmatism must be defined as well. Iran maintains close relations with Christian Armenia, while it has some tensions with Muslim Shiite Azerbaijan. This pattern of relationship is based upon the Iranian local geo-political calculus that also involves relations with Russia and Turkey.<sup>47</sup> Iran's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are oftentimes represented as proving Iran's pragmatism and realpolitik: if Iran prefers the Christian Armenia to the Muslim Azerbaijan, it highlights that Iranian policy is carried out in the framework of realpolitik and pragmatism, juxtaposed to Islam. However, this distinction can be misleading. There is hardly any state with a pure ideology that is not vulnerable to political constraints when it is practically implemented. Even if a state is ideologically driven, it is likely to prefer choices dictated by realpolitik, if the latter do not entail an outright contradiction to the ideology in the core interests. The USSR abstained from any support of the communist parties in the Arab world, but this fact was by no means a signal that the Soviet Union would be more pragmatic regarding the implementation of a market economy.

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<sup>44</sup> Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy After Saddam", The Washington Quarterly, 2010, pp173-189, p. 174.

<sup>45</sup> Iranian newspapers reprinted a war scenario (published by an Iranian blogger and referred to by numerous Iranian media outlets) <http://rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=115644> according to which Iran should and can destroy Israel with its population. The article's title is "legal proofs of the duty to annihilate of Israel." There is no intention to claim that a blog post reflects an official Iranian doctrine, but we do pay attention to the specific train of thought: the author argues that "Iran's military attack on Israel is not a primary jihad but is an example of defensive jihad however if we consider such attack as primary jihad as mentioned before it can be carried on in the age of absence of infallible imam and under the authorization of Vali Faghih." The point is that an initiated attack is considered as defensive even if it is clearly offensive in Western terms.

<sup>46</sup> "The Zionist regime is a real cancerous tumor, that should be cutted off and will be cutted off" Khamenei's sermon, 2 Feb.2012, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=18923>

<sup>47</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "DEALING WITH AZERBAIJAN: THE POLICIES OF TURKEY AND IRAN TOWARD THE KARABAKH WAR (1991-1994)", Global Research in International Affairs <http://www.gloria-center.org/2011/10/dealing-with-azerbaijan-the-policies-of-turkey-and-iran-toward-the-karabakh-war-1991-1994/>

Rational decision making is based largely on the presumption that a concerned political leader knows the most relevant facts, such as its own capacities, the adversary capacities, and the real balance of force. None of these facts are necessarily valid for Iran. In other words, it is not that Iran doesn't think about consequences, but it may be unaware of, discard, or misunderstand the consequences they face. For instance, the Iranian leadership is firmly certain that an American or Israeli attack on its nuclear installations will stir up sympathy for Iran in the Muslim world, which will rise against the US and Israel in order to defend Iran.<sup>48</sup> Here we can see ideology at work. The official ideological media depict the recent events across the Arab world not as an Arab Spring, but an Islamic Awakening (*bidari-ye eslami*). Any other assessment that would rebut the official ideological stance is unacceptable. Therefore, the Iranian regime is likely to be trapped by its own propaganda with regard to nuclear deterrence. It would comment input signals of an adversary only as comforting the Iranian position.

This Iranian belief holds despite the recent Wikileaks disclosure that some of the Arab Gulf state leaders would welcome an attack against Iranian nuclear installations. Similarly, until recently Iran used to rule out any possibility of an American attack due to several reasons, such as the Obama administration's unwillingness to wage a new war, or its inability to effectively strike all nuclear objects in Iran.<sup>49</sup> None of these Iranian calculi are irrational or illogical per se, however completely incorrect they may be. Thus, a heavier emphasis should be placed upon the difference between being something irrational and being something factually incorrect. The latter will likely hinder Iran's assessment of their rivals.

Intelligence communities in authoritarian regimes have at least two basic functions that distinguish them from their counterparts in parliamentary democracies. These two functions, first fully developed in the inter-war USSR, have since been largely replicated in most other one party states:

1. The intelligence community is central to the structure of the one-party state, systems of repression, and social control which seek to suppress all challenges to its authority.
2. The intelligence community also acts as a mechanism for reinforcing the regime's misconceptions of the outside world.<sup>50</sup>

The case of Saddam Hussein represents the best example for this way of thinking. Saddam's understanding of the facts of the 1991 Gulf War was very different from the United States' understanding. Disagreement over facts can often be traced to different methods of analysis. For instance despite widely available reports, studies, and histories published after the war, Saddam felt that such open source information was little more than disinformation.<sup>51</sup> The propensity of the intelligence apparatus in non-democratic states to produce highly biased and distorted analysis can also be highlighted by Soviet KGB activity. The KGB would discard the importance of open source intelligence, and reported on the situation in the West in a manner compatible with

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<sup>48</sup> This argument is articulated not only by Iran but also by western opponents of the military options. Although it seems logical, this rationale ignores the deeply enrooted hostility towards the Shiite Iran within the Sunni World. Moreover, it is more than questionable, why the Arab or Muslim street that remained indifferent and silent during the Israel-Hizballah war (2006) and the operation Cast lead (2008) should show more deference towards the Shiite Iran.

<sup>49</sup> This option was pointed on in the war scenario estimate that was published on the personal website of the Supreme Leader and authored by a certain Amir Mohebyan <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=17882>

<sup>50</sup> Cristopher Andrew, *Intelligence, International Relations and 'Under-theorisation'*, *Intelligence and National Security* (2004), 19:2, 170-184, p.177.

<sup>51</sup> Kevin M. Woods & Mark Stout (2010): *Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Strom'*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:1, 5-41, p.13.



the Politburo worldview. This state of affairs pushed Gorbachev to issue a note to the KGB (December 1985) on “the impermissibility of distortions of the factual state of affairs in messages and informational reports sent to the Central Committee of the CPSU and other ruling bodies.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite the differences between the USSR, Saddam’s Iraq, and Iran, Iran’s intelligence apparatus does bear some similarities. The analysis of Iranian research confirms this presumption, as the research center of the Iranian Parliament published (April 2011) a study entitled “Popular Uprisings in The Middle East and Security Concerns of the IRI.”<sup>53</sup> The main characteristics traced in this report are:

1. Strong influence of conspiracy theories, even on the simple tactical level. The US diplomatic stance is regarded as having secret targets, ranging from expanding overseas bases to intentions to harm Iran and spread hatred of Shiites and Iran.
2. Inability to see the causal relation between Iran’s actions and their rival’s reaction.

Below are the highlights of the report:

#### **American Military Presence in the South Sudan**

*"Based on the Rimland theory, there is a plausible scenario according to which the American military presence in the "the Republic of South Sudan "and in Libya will increase. One of the reasons is that Washington supports the referendum of the partition of Sudan, which is an introduction towards bigger military presence in the strategic geography of the Horn of Africa. The consultations of Washington with the first elected president of the South Sudan, Salva Kir Mayardit (for construction of an air base) are estimated in this framework. Some long-range bombers B-52 and refueling aircrafts KS-135 will be stationed there in order to support aerial attacks in countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa. "*<sup>54</sup>

#### **The US gave green light the Saudis to invade Bahrain**

*" ... Some developments in Bahrain are orchestrated by the United States and realized by the Saudi Arabia. Particularly, the decision of Riyadh to send troops to Bahrain took place following two days after the visit of the American secretary of defense to the region. This indicates that it was Washington’s green light for the Saudis to send troops to Bahrain."*<sup>55</sup>

#### **The US incites arms race in the Gulf**

*" Some of the US plans targeting to create collateral crises in the region are organized through the use of the sold weapons or through incentive of the Persian Gulf Arab States to enter into arms race."*<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff (1996): The KGB reports to Gorbachev, Intelligence and National Security, 11:2, 224-244, p.226.

<sup>53</sup> May be accessed on the website <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/789029> "khizeshha-e mardomi va-molahazat-e amniyati-ye jumhuriy-e eslami-ye iran".

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. pp.24-25.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.p.15.

### **Iranophobia**

*“America supposed that the resort to public diplomacy with regard to the Shiite crescent has a big potential of tension between the IRI and the Arab States of the region. One of the US strategies to take security advantages of the unrest in the region is to provoke scenarios of Iranophobia. One can estimate that it will increase in the short term.”<sup>57</sup>*

### **Iran’s covert diplomacy**

*“It follows from the above mentioned that the approach of the Islamic Republic Iran towards the unrests in the region ought to be selective and based upon employing of both open and covert diplomacy. For instance, in what concerns the support of Shiite unrests in Saudi Arabia, the approach of the IRI should be cautious and accurate and based upon covert diplomacy, while in what concerns the support of the Yemeni opposition, it must be public.”<sup>58</sup>*

Though the aforementioned report is not a secret intelligence estimate, the difference between open source research and confidential intelligence estimates is not crucial. Therefore, the conclusion would most probably be that Iran would be unaware of its assessment mistakes that are tantamount to miscalculations with all consequences.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.21, in original :“Iranherasi” might be translated as “iranophobia”.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.11.

## Conclusion

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Numerous social, religious, ideological, and political factors will impede the elaboration of an Iranian deterrence doctrine. As Iranian ruling bodies suffer from chronic mismanagement and a shortage of long term planning, any concrete doctrine that is adopted will most probably not be thoroughly implemented. The term deterrence does exist in the Iranian military rhetoric, though it usually appears in various media and research outlets as a synonym for defense or retaliation. Thus far, there is no elaborated conventional deterrence doctrine. The possession of nuclear arms and potential use thereof are unlikely to spur Iran to develop its own deterrence theory. If Western experience is taken into consideration, at least several years are required for the accessibility of nuclear weapons until elaboration of a coherent deterrence doctrine. One may assume that an Iranian deterrence doctrine will resemble the deterrence thinking which exists today: reactive to what is perceived by Iran as nuclear threats of the challengers, and restrictive to rhetoric of retaliation.

Shiites will affect deterrence theory with cultural patterns of mentality, though not through overtly hard-core religious motivation which discards conventional cost-benefit analysis. The religious establishment in Iran is weak and very dependent on the regime. Therefore, the leading clerics will not be able to exert deep influence on the development of a deterrence doctrine. Though the rhetoric of the most extremist Iranian hardliners does have a dimension of irrational religious motivation, in-depth analysis shows that this does not exert direct influence on the decision making process. Furthermore, it is unlikely to have more influence in the future, as adopting religious zeal as an outright political tool of the deterrence game requires the highest degree of political and religious credentials that neither the current Iranian leadership nor its successors possesses.

The Shiite impact on the future Iranian deterrence doctrine is not clearly articulated in explicit reference to religious texts and doctrines. However, some characteristics such as a Manichean worldview, the adversary's demonization, and conspiracy theories are likely to manifest themselves in an inadequate assessment of adversary's intentions and capacities. As Iranian history shows, the leadership might conclude incorrect calculations, but it is far from being suicidal. Coupled with the flaws of the intelligence bodies' functionality, the biggest danger is miscalculation based on incorrect rival assessment, not the Ahmadinejad-like apocalyptic posture that the Iranian regime could adopt.

Efforts to deter a nuclear Iran must leave no room for ambiguity. The signals transmitted to Iran should focus first on minimizing the probability that Iran misreads them, whether or not the signals are defensive or offensive towards the Iranian regime. For that purpose, messages or direct threats could be transmitted to as many Iranian leaders as possible. The message ought to be as clear as possible, describing an immediate reaction to any Iranian move. The transmission of deterrent signals must be followed by concrete actions. Though such measures are not a formula for a successful Iranian deterrance, they are likely to minimize Iran's inclination to miscalculate, disregard, or assume impossible.

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