

## NUCLEARISATION IN THE GULF AND IT'S IMPACT ON THE REGIONAL STABILITY

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### **Abstract**

*The Gulf region due to its vast oil and gas reserves has attracted world attention especially the major powers to meet their energy needs. The USA has declared it as a vital national security interest and is bent upon using all elements of national power to ensure the energy resources of Gulf are available for US and its allies without preconditions. The oil crises of 1970s were the watershed for the US policy planners who considered guaranteed and uninterrupted Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) for transportation of energy needs. Therefore, to safeguard any eventuality, the USA commenced basing of its military for protection of SLOCs and later in the transformation of Middle East as a result of US actions in response to War on Terror and regime change philosophy, the USA and other Extra Regional Forces (ERF) have established permanent bases in the Gulf with the aim of conducting counter terrorism operations and providing stability to highly volatile region. The Iranian nuclear aspiration is not new phenomena, which from Iran's perspective is the only deterrent in the face of credible threat surrounding it with the presence of ERF, ever hostile Israel and now Saudi Arabia leading a dominant anti-Iranian alliance. While other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Israel are pursuing nuclear path, but not demonized by USA and its allies while unilateral pressure is being applied on Iran for capping and later abandoning nuclear capabilities. This research article therefore, sketches the overall security environments of Middle East and Gulf, highlighting transformation, power transition and evolving balance of power. The nuclear aspects have been covered in a wholesome manner in order to build comprehensive picture of nuclearization in the Gulf and its impact on regional stability.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear Deterrence, Regional Stability, Balance of Power, Deterrence.

### **Introduction**

**T**he Gulf has generally remained under the world attention as a hot spot of international security concern due to competing and often conflicting regional and global power's interests. Apart from turf war of dominance, the Gulf holds around 60% of world's oil reserve and "the Gulf nations hold the world's second, third, fourth and fifth natural gas reserves after Russia"<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the Gulf region is of

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vivacious significance due to its geographical location, vast energy reserves and unfortunately persistent instability due to host of factors like; terrorism, intra state fighting and competing race for dominance. "The region's unstable security environments will be under sharp focus because of new international security risks posed by international terrorist groups, the mushrooming of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and credible nuclearization of Iran"<sup>2</sup>. The security situation therefore, is volatile and indeterminate. "Most countries in the region are facing the danger of potential extremist and terrorist activity on their territory, with profound implications for the stability of wider Middle East"<sup>3</sup>. The Iranian nuclear quest and ERF around Iran with nuclear weapon systems capabilities have further compounded the regional security matrix. While Iran feels that the acquisition of nuclear capability is guarantor of its national security in the troubled region and looming threat from Israel, ERF and the Muslim alliance led by Saudi Arabia. From this point of view, the Iranian urge for nuclear weapons seems to be defensive action against persistent threat. From the lens of balance of power theory, such a scenario is creating balance of power between Iran and the opposing alliance, which has inherent stability with potential destabilizing factors. The Iranian nuclear deal added new dimensions to security environment, with opening up of Iran to the outside world, which by and large has been hailed by international community.

### **Analytical Debate on Phenomena of Nuclearization in the Gulf Extra Regional Force (ERF) as a Potential Trigger**

The strategic importance of Gulf due to perceived energy security for Western alliance led by the United States has resulted into considerable presence of ERF in the Gulf. Dating it back to oil crisis of 1970, the US policy planners considered physical control over energy resources of the Gulf for continuous supply of oil. The unfortunate incidents of 9/11 and resultant US and allied actions in wider Middle East further compounded the security environment of the region with massive deployment of ERF in the conceptual manifestation of offensive realism. The current situation in and around the Gulf and the U.S arrangements for military basing in Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, whereas, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain horde US military to serve as significant jumping-off points. The transformation in the Middle East in the shape of violent conflicts and regime change has resulted into institutional collapse of those countries thus justifying and validating the presence of ERF. Apart from security duties, for example, a US, NBC team has conducted a several trainings packages in the Arabian Sea to replicate the provisions of Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Similarly, the Germany had an NBC battalion stationed in Kuwait in 2003 before Iraq war to offer shield against possible Iraqi biological and chemical attack. "Following the 2003 war, 16 NATO Allies have militaries deployed in Iraq. Moreover, all 26 NATO countries are also

contributing to NATO's training mission there, either inside or outside of Iraq. For example, German forces are training Iraqi police and soldiers in the UAE, as the Political Committee learned during a visit to the Emirates in June 2005.<sup>4</sup> NATO is collaborating in the wider Middle East region within the context of the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) agreed upon at the 2004 Istanbul Summit"<sup>5</sup>. The principal enterprise of alliance is to augment security through dynamically stimulating NATO's collaboration with the relevant countries. In the background of ICI, the NATO is assisting the joint training and mock exercises to enable alliance partners to effectively operate as a cohesive integrated force with reliable interoperability mechanism. The NATO is widely perceived in the Middle Eastern region in terms of "US foreign policy extension". NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer pronounces that NATO should do best efforts in conducting public diplomacy in the Arab world for wider acceptance by the people instead of focussing only on the governments. Despite benign intentions, the manifestation of alliance's motives have been perceived as an attempt to colonize the region by physical occupation. The ERF has basing in the region with conventional military capabilities superimposed by nuclear capabilities encircling Iran with overt hostile posturing, thus exposing Iran to biggest national security concern of state survival and sovereignty. The evolving regional landscape is transforming the balance of power in favour of Iran and at global level in favour of Russia due to stalemate and later victories by Syrian government supported by Russian Armed Forces. The Middle East has now been distinctly divided in two camps; Iran - Russia and Saudi Arabia - USA. In such circumstances, the nuclear capability is assumed to be a sole guarantor of state survival for Iran.

### **USA-Guarantor of Extended Deterrence in the Gulf**

According to United States Iranian, nuclear ambitions are potentially destabilizing the entire region. Therefore, till P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, "The U.S. considered Iran with its ballistic missiles and potential of developing nuclear weapons as a direct threat to the GCC and also poses a threat to all friends and allies in the Middle Eastern region".<sup>6</sup> The U.S. administration asserted that both conventional and unconventional military capabilities will be available in defending its allies against possible Iranian threat. Mentioning the Iranian dangers, the Obama administration changed the deployment of missile defence sites from Poland and radar in the Czech Republic to an approach closer to Iran containing Aegis class Navy missile defence vessels, ground radar and eventually land based Navy Standard Missile interceptors. This will minimize the damage in case of Iranian attack and add to deterrence capabilities of GCC allies. The U.S. is presently engaged in constructing a defensive buffer "which consist of Multi-tier Ballistic Missile Defence System

consisting of Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) and Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC<sub>3</sub>) missile systems supported with the most advanced Radar and Command and Control facilities.”<sup>7</sup>It is worth mentioning that the “Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems have been delivered to Kuwait, the UAE, Oman and Qatar, along-with positioning of Aegis armed warships in the Gulf. The U.S.A has also established monitoring radar facilities across GCC for EW purpose from possible missile attack by Iran.”<sup>8</sup>The USA has demonstrated the intentions and capabilities to undertake defensive strikes against Iran in support of GCC alliance partners. Any such miscalculations will have dire consequences for the region and international security. The empirical evidence of US presence in and around the Gulf region can be proved by this statement. “US have basing of troops in Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Diego Garcia containing more than 300 battle aircraft, 30 ships, and personnel numbering around 35,000, including sailors, soldiers, marines and airmen.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Nuclear Ambitions of GCC Countries**

By historical traditions, majority of GCC countries are not favourably poised towards building nuclear capabilities despite looming threats from Israel and Iran. Most of their security needs have been provided by the ERF led by USA, concurrently the capacity building of their militaries and alliance partnerships to avert any potential threats to state or regime survival. All the Gulf States are NPT members and most are also signatories to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreements on the nuclear issue and the Gulf States in last few decades had also voluntarily abandoned the nuclear option. However, since December 2006, Gulf States are re-considering the nuclear option. UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain decided to commence bilateral negotiations with IAEA and contemplate the instituting civilian nuclear programs. The Saudi government is considering 16 nuclear reactors in coming twenty years with projected cost of US \$ 7 billion on each plant. “The US \$ 112 billion investment, will deliver one-fifth of the Kingdom’s electricity. Saudi government has also announced the development of a nuclear city to train and house the technical workforce that will be needed to achieve these ambitions.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Nuclear Ambitions of Israel and its Manifestation**

The nuclear programme of Israel has been compelled principally by its susceptibilities, threat analyses and security centric state priorities in the heart of hostile Arab neighbours bent upon undoing the state of Israel as it has been considered as illegitimate occupation and conspiracy of world powers. The series of wars with Arab coalitions forced Israel to build nuclear deterrence not only ensuring national security but also deterring the combined Arab front against any situation

like Arab-Israel Wars of 1967 and 1973. Therefore, “Israel boarded its nuclear programme soon after its foundation i.e. in 1950s”<sup>11</sup>. While precise evaluation of Israel’s nuclear capability has been challenging due to “its ambiguous posture.”<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that, “Israel’s nuclear policy has developed from secrecy to ambiguity to opacity.”<sup>13</sup> The policy is again on the crossroads “owing to the threat dynamics and limited success of other means of threat mitigation.”<sup>14</sup> Israel is concerned over Iranian nuclear deal, which from Israel’s standpoint fears that Iran will develop nuclear weapons to destroy the state of Israel. The primary evidence presented in to justify this assertion is President Ahmedi Nijad’s usual rhetoric of destroying the state of Israel. In this backdrop, Iran’s nuclear ambitions surpasses all of Israel’s other security urgencies. Therefore, Israel has a compulsion of maintaining its relationship with the United States and making all-out efforts that Iran by no means becomes a nuclear power. Israel’s response to the Iranian deal “profound unhappiness without outright condemnation -- has to be understood in this context, and the assumptions behind it need to be pragmatically examined.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Iranian Nuclear Compulsions in the Evolving Security Environments**

The Iranian nuclear program surfaced with the construction of its first nuclear reactor by the US backed —“Atoms for Peace program in 1957”. Iran joined IAEA in 1958 as a member state and in 1968 signed Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that became operative on 5 March 1970. This treaty was aimed to preclude nuclear proliferation and permitted to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes only. “During the 1970s, Iran was provided technical, scientific and materiel resources by the United States, West Germany and France to facilitate its peaceful nuclear energy projects.”<sup>16</sup> The first momentous transformation in Iran’s strategic environment came after Iraq war where, Iraq used missiles and chemical weapons against Iranian military and selected civilian targets, which resulted into massive losses and “at that time Iran did not possess adequate response or deterrent capabilities”.<sup>17</sup> The prime stimulus behind Iran’s nuclear program in the 1980s to 1990s, was to deter Iraq from any future misadventure and ensure state sovereignty and regime’s survival. At the turn of the century, Iran witnessed profound changes in regional security matrix that intensified trepidations for regime’s survival and continuation of revolution system. Over the last decade or so, the Iran has become more determined in fast track proceedings with nuclear program to ensure balance of power and deterrence against any attempts of regime change, as it felt isolated both politically and militarily due to sanctions and looming war mongering by USA, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The US led war on terrorism and initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan made Iran suspicious and uncomfortable due to historical enmity Iran had from USA, which was vindicated by State of the Union address of 2002

during which, “President George W. Bush branded Iran as ‘axis of evil’ along with Iraq and North Korea.”<sup>18</sup> Iran’s apprehensions of looming threat by the USA became profusely clear as its survival was blatantly exposed through public rhetoric and speeches. Furthermore, in 2003 the USA also invaded Iraq therefore, Iran’s fears of enemy on its East and West along-with massive presence in the Gulf reinforced the perception that “the ultimate aim of USA now appeared to be a regime change in Iran on the pattern of rest of Middle East.”<sup>19</sup> It reconfirmed growing Iranian suspicions of encirclement and delivered substantiation to Iran that the USA had massed up the military wherewithal and political will to carry out regime change. Iran now viewed the United States as its new existential threat. “The regime change in Iraq and the locating of USA’s military in the Gulf and the wider Middle East magnified Iran’s security apprehensions, which in-fact strengthened the urgency of acquiring nuclear capability for regime’s survival and the only leverage for deterrence.”<sup>20</sup> President Obama raised concerns about growing nuclearization by stating; “The greatest threat to U.S. and global security is nuclear proliferation by an increasing number of states”<sup>21</sup>. Over the past one decade, Iranian nuclear program has been attracting world attention in the context of proliferation, developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and growing threat to regional and intentional security. “Multiple layers of economic sanctions, diplomatic pressures and threats of military strikes have not yielded results as Iran continues to pursue nuclear proliferation. The international community has been unable to forge a consensus against Iran with respect to the potential nuclear danger.”<sup>22</sup> President Barack Obama stated during State of the Union address in 2012 that “—Let there be no doubt that America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and I will take no options, off the table to achieve that goal.”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, all such assertions have been viewed narrowly from only one prism of nuclear proliferation by Iran and all measures to stop it through coercive diplomacy, sanctions and isolation, without comprehending bigger picture of prevailing and evolving strategic environment in the Gulf and wider Middle East. While realist assertions of offensive realism in terms of power maximization by the USA and its allies and defensive realism by security maximization by Iran and its supporters have to be analysed in their respective contexts, to avoid strategic miscalculation and respecting each other’s core national interests.

However, the fears that a nuclear Iran poses existential security challenges to neighbouring states has its own logic and possible domino effect and incentive for other states to pursue the similar course. It may also be understood that the pyramid of nuclear stimulus model has exemplified the principal motives as to why nations are incentivized to pursue nuclear capability. The non-linear phrases can be summarised as “deterrence, prestige, survival, security, hegemony, grand autonomy

and lastly the super power status”. Not necessarily that each one of such phrases is applicable universally, however, some of these are valid for analysing potential nuclear weapon aspiring states. Therefore, perceived Iranian compulsions for acquisition of nuclear capability can be attributed to following aspects:-

- **Regime Survival in the Face of Hostile Posturing:** Iranian crucial national security concern is survival of revolution system and regime. The Iranian fears have been compounded with US and its allies posturing against Iran and physical deployment of ERF military capabilities encircling Iran. Several such attempts of regime change in Iran and transformation in Middle East have reinforced Iranian assertions. The flip to Iranian opposition during last two elections and recent uprising due to rising inflation and joblessness due to perceived curbs resulted out of sanctions have vindicated Iran’s fears. The rising Saudi-US-Israeli rhetoric against Iran and evolving situation in the Middle East are alarming developments for national security of Iran.
- **Homeland Security:** Like any other sovereign country, Iran’s priority of national security revolves around both external and internal security challenges confronting the state. However, the rising threat of militancy, transformation in regional balance of power tilting in favour of Iran and Saudi Arabia and its allies attempts to reassert by force to alter the power transition in its favour even using force if required have created hazy environment for Iran’s strategic security calculus.
- **Dominant Influence in the Wider Middle East:** It may be noted that strategic culture of Iran is manifested by its perception of great power status since Persian Empire of 550 B.C, therefore, reserve the right of demonstrating as a leading power in the Gulf region. Iran radiates the impression of “a resister against Western and US imperialism in the region as well as through alliances internationally.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Iranian Nuclear Deal 2015**

The departure of Ahmedi Nijad brought a substantial change in Iran’s political scene as the growing Iranian realization that intransigence on nuclear issue may further cause colossal losses in the face of struggling economy, sanctions and virtual isolation. It was in this background that President Hassan Rouhani softened his stance on nuclear issue and demonstrated his willingness to negotiate a deal in return for lifting of sanctions and return to international community as a reliable partner. From author’s perspective, “The pursuit of “power beyond the state” has cost Iran significant economic losses and dwindling state of national harmony in the backdrop of current uprising in 2018, which has created serious internal fault lines”.

Therefore, now the pragmatic leadership in Iran is striving to construct a balance among these prongs. In this backdrop, Iran and P 5 +1 reached a historic deal on 14 July 2015, aimed at capping Iran's nuclear program and reintegrating Iran into wider international community and phased lifting of sanctions. The agreement was hailed by Iran and the international community as covert Iranian program would now be under the eyes of world powers and IAEA, while Iran could celebrate by negotiating with P5+1 from the position of strength. By and large it appeared to be a win – win for all parties. However, Saudi Arabia, Israel and current US Administration led by President Trump have been over critical of the deal trying their utmost to undo the international agreement unprecedented in the world history. Israeli Prime Minister has been propagating at all international forums about the potential dangers from Iran's nuclear ambitions and sketching out possible doomsday scenarios during his speeches at UN General Assembly. His sentiments have been largely shared by Saudi Arabia and now US President Trump has also joined the same club. The potential fall-out of decertification of deal by USA, which has so far been resisted by EU will have dire consequences for the Gulf stability, which might induce Iran not to abandon nuclear path as the only way to retain its influence and justified core national security interest.

## **Conclusion**

The article has sketched the security environment of Middle East and particularly the Gulf from strategic standpoint and the aspects of nuclearization. From author's own perspective, the Iranian nuclear program should not be viewed narrowly and clubbed only with Iranian nuclear ambitions. Unfortunately, Iran's relations with the West especially the USA since 1979 have been tense, uncertain and unpredictable. While Iran has been witnessing the covert and overt threats of regime change and state survival in last four decades. In the face of hostile USA positioned around Iran, unusually harsh stance of Israel and now belligerent posturing by Saudi Arabia and its allies, the only credible aspects of Iranian national security is nuclear deterrence, which from their perspective is not only providing tangible shield against conventional attacks but also creating and maintaining balance of power in the power transition of Middle East. While nuclearization is a fact, however, has to view comprehensively keeping in mind ambitions of GCC countries, Israeli posturing, ERF nuclear capable weapon systems in the Gulf and Iran's defensive measures in the face of looming threat. Therefore, nuclear factors are proving a reasonable degree of strategic stability in Gulf and if altered by force will have potentially devastating consequences for the whole region. Therefore, denuclearization have to be carefully calibrated with discrimination, otherwise whole region is likely to plunge into further destabilization.

## NOTES

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