

(Book Review) Iran and Nuclear Weapons: Protracted Conflict and Proliferation by *Saira Khan*

NUST Journal of International
Peace & Stability
2018, Vol. I (2) Pages 165-168
njips.nust.edu.pk

Routledge, 2010

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Saira Khan in her book ‘Iran and Nuclear weapons: Protracted Conflict and proliferation’, has discussed a number of key issues related to the Iranian nuclear program, and made an attempt to make explicit the factors that persuade a state to seek nuclear weapons. Khan addresses the following questions in here book: why a state enduring economic pressure and international condemnation still looks forward to developing its nuclear capabilities? What are the drivers of the Iranian nuclear keenness to acquire the status of a nuclear power? What is the relation between protracted conflicts and the risks of proliferation of nuclear weapons considering the Iranian case in Middle East?

The book is divided into three parts; the first part explores the factors that help to understand the Iranian nuclear urge. The second part provides the readers with the theoretical framework about the nuclear agenda of Iran in context with the protracted conflicts it faces. The third part is the case study of Iran that discusses in detail the start of the nuclear program and its progress throughout era when it faced immense and harsh economic sanctions and isolation.

In the first part of the book, the author discusses three level of analysis to evaluate the Iranian nuclear program i.e., individual, domestic and international level of analysis. While discussing the individual level of analysis, Khan elaborates how the Iranian nuclear program evolved under different leaders, starting from Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, under whose rule the Iranian nuclear program started. Khan asserts that it was under Shah’s rule that Iran established the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran in 1974 but Shah did not plan to acquire nuclear weapons nor did he intend to proliferate them. Regardless of this, the nuclear program of Iran continued, however it slowed down after the Iranian revolution when Khomeini put an end to Shah’s regime. Despite the change in leadership, the nuclear program was never completely terminated. After Khomeini, leaders like Rafsanjani aggressively accelerated the nuclear program calling nuclear weapons ‘poor man’s deterrents’. However, there were moderate leaders like Khatami with a theory of ‘Dialogue

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among Civilizations' who intended to slow down the process, but none of the leaders completely prohibited the nuclear development. Ahmadinejad has been widely associated with the Iranian nuclear program due to the fact that he strongly supported the idea of a nuclear Iran, but worth mentioning is the fact that when he came into power, he inherited a well-developed nuclear program. Keeping in view these facts, Khan asserts that none of the Iranian leaders can be categorized as responsible for the nuclear program of Iran.

Considering the analysis at domestic level, Khan asserts that according to the renowned scholars, the public is not well aware of the Iranian nuclear program which the author labels as a characteristic of a proliferators' regime. Even though the surveys depict that almost 80 percent of the population supports the nuclear program, it is unclear what the support actually means. There is a divide among the political parties; the pragmatic conservatives and the ideological conservatives, about the status of the nuclear program, where the pragmatic conservatives support the idea of dialogue with US and the ideological conservatives strictly abide by the idea of making Iran a nuclear power. According to the author, the analysis at the systemic level portrays a whole new picture which is widely discussed in the international politics; that Iran is convinced to acquire nuclear weapons due to the threats it face from regional and international enemies. Khan criticizes the nuclear analysts about their mere claim that security is the central drive for Iran's nuclear program as they have failed to discuss the why security is the main factor in this scenario.

The second part of the book presents the theoretical underpinning to clarify the proliferation tendencies of states indulged in protracted conflicts. Khan in this part places her plot that there are three variables that signify a determined proliferator; the independent variable which is protracted conflict, the intervening variables which are security, prestige, and bargaining leverage and the dependent variable which is nuclear proliferation. She postulates that a state that faces protracted conflicts is likely to acquire nuclear weapons for the sake of preserving its prestige and honor, and most of all its security. Iran is facing such conflicts regionally in the form of Israel, and internationally in the form of US. Also the regional territorial conflicts like the Iran-Iraq conflict 1980-1989 in past and the conflicts with Israel increase the probability of Iran to become a nuclear power. She further suggests that the asymmetric conflict with US in which Iran is the weaker state, propels it to escalate its nuclear program. Also being the weaker state, Iran has to acquire the power or capability to either defeat its enemies or to gain leverage at the bargaining table. She supports her argument with facts that the enemies of Iran-Israel and US-are allies, which possess nuclear weapons that creates to a security dilemma for Iran, where its enemies are far more powerful, posing territorial threats. While discussing the connectivity between independent, dependent and intervening variables, Khan asserts that the protracted conflicts had been a major cause of nuclear proliferation in history and the states like US, Britain, France, Germany, China, India, Pakistan and Israel had developed their nuclear programs for their prestige and security. Khan claims that the same reasons affect the Iranian ambition to attain nuclear weapons.

The third part is further divide into four chapters that discusses in detail the Iranian nuclear program which started during the Shah's regime and how the process

faced an up and down in the momentum but continued over the pace of time. Khan's analysis of the conflicts faced by Iran further elaborates the relation between the independent variable (the protracted conflict), the dependent variable (nuclear proliferation) and the intervening variable (prestige, bargaining options, national honor, and security). Khan labels the two protracted conflicts initially with Iraq and later with Israel as the motivating forces for the Iranian leadership to consider nuclear deterrence. Khan asserts that after the Iranian revolution, the friendly relations between Iran and US turned into hostile relations overnight, which worsened with the series of unpleasant incidents like the 1979 hostage crisis, the 1983 bombing of US marine barracks in Lebanon. These incidents compelled US to add Iran in the terrorism list. Khan asserts that on part of Iran, US support to Iraq and Israel in their conflicts with Iran was also a concerning matter. Along with this Iran's increasing number of agreements with Pakistan, China and North Korea for the development of nuclear program protracted the conflict between US and Iran. Iranian assets were frozen by US, harsh economic sanctions were imposed on Iran, and adding fuel to the fire, Iran was called a rogue state for not only being a state engaged in terrorism but also for developing WMDs. Later after the 9/11 attacks US alleged that Iran has been sponsoring terror in Middle-East and it also had links with Al-Qaeda. In 2003, US intervention in Iraq was initially perceived as advantageous for Iran as it overthrew its long-term rival Sadaam Husain, but gradually it turned out to be unpleasant as the pro-US government continued to maintain its power in Iraq. Khan's analysis depicts that the continued tussle between the regional actors and Iran and the hostile US policies towards Iran are the factors that keep Iran motivated to acquire nuclear power status.

Though this book is a good piece of academic writing for those who intend to study the Middle-Eastern security dynamics, however it needs a better depiction of the regional rivalries and politics between Iran and Saudi Arabia which is a source of debate in the regional as well as international scenario. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been indulged in regional adversity for the sake of regional hegemony, and a major concern for Iran is the distinct relations between Saudi Arabia and US. This directs Iran to look for a nuclear umbrella to protect its national as well as international interests. Also, Iran's desire to unite the states with Shiite majority to form the Shiite crescent (states including Azerbaijan, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain) and to lead them has also propelled the state to pursue its nuclear program. This can become a major driver of nuclear proliferation in the Middle-Eastern region.

Khan's statement that Iran could consider to end its nuclear program if US would extend the hand of friendship is a very optimist view. It does not seem to be a possibility that US would establish friendly relations with Iran, whilst completely brushing aside Israel and the adverse effects this friendship could have in America due to the dominant Jewish lobby there. Also, how can US overlook the regional ally Saudi Arabia and its rivalry with Iran for regional supremacy? Overall, the book is a good addition to the readings on nuclear proliferation and conflicts generated due to this struggle.