

## **Iran: Foreign and Security Policy Aspects**

**by Dr. Peter Roell**

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank you for inviting me to the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations” in Rhodes.

I have already been able to comment on *Maritime Security – A Threat to World Trade?* in a previous forum at this conference. Following the discussions in Roundtable 4 “Atom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Problems and Prospects” I would now like to add to the technical questions some aspects of political, economic and military nature. I think it is right to say that the international community is viewing the nuclear activities of Iran with some trepidation.

### **Iran’s Threat Perception**

If one wants to understand Iran’s current threat perception it is necessary to examine the thinking of the current political and military leaders in the country. When looking at the deployment of American forces in the region and the scale of conventional rearmament of neighbouring states it is almost understandable that Iran’s leadership feels both encircled and thus frightened. The recent American decision to supply Saudi-Arabia with new weapon systems to the value of 60 billion US \$ will hardly diminish any fears. Tehran is also well aware that Iran is very much on the target planning agenda of both Washington and Tel Aviv.

The primary foreign policy goal of Tehran is thus to reduce and weaken U.S. presence in the region and to strengthen Iran’s position as a significant regional power.

Iran is deeply suspicious of the West, especially of the “great Satan” U.S.A. and the “little Satan” Israel. The use of the word “Satan” is not necessarily directed against the U.S.A. as it is against Western politics, democracy, freedom of thought and emancipation. Such terms have much to do with what we in the West term “restoration”, a concept alien to the Iranian leadership. The current Iranian leadership is less frightened of an Israeli attack; it however greatly fears a war with the United States.

Iran has not forgotten Western support for Iraq during the Iranian-Iraqi war in the 80ies. It has also not forgotten the U.S. embargo following the hostage taking at the U.S. embassy in Tehran from November 4, 1979 until January 20, 1981 which limited Iran’s access to Western technology.

## **Iran's Ambitions**

In order to achieve the status of a regional power the current Iranian leadership is using following strategy:

- Expansion of the nuclear and missile programs
- Concentration on asymmetric military operations
- Opportunistic use of oil as a weapon
- Empowerment of the Shiite population both in the region and globally.

## **Iran's Nuclear Program**

The Iranian nuclear program goes back to the days of the late Shah in the 1960ies. Following the 1979 revolution the program was ended and it was only in the 1990s that Tehran embarked on a new nuclear program. In 2002 confidential documents were released by an Iranian group of exiles which hinted at a new and secret Iranian nuclear program. In 2003 the government of Mohamed Khatami agreed to cease the enrichment of uranium; in January 2006 president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proudly announced that his country would once again restart its program of uranium enrichment.

There have however been numerous indications of secret and not so secret attempts of Iran to acquire crucial components for both the missile and nuclear programmes since 2003. These efforts underscore the Iranian desire to become a military nuclear power. In 2009 the new head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukia Amamo, announced that "Information available to the IAEA raises concern about the possible existence in Iran of past or current undisclosed activities related to the deployment of a nuclear payload for a missile." Experts are now of the opinion that Iran will have such a capability sometime between 2010 and 2015.

Iran's military nuclear ambitions cannot be viewed separately from its missile program. Both are expressions of Iranian ambition to be a regional power. Its missile program is largely based on the modified Shahab-3 rocket with a range of up to 2,000 kilometres and on mobile missiles with a similar range. The solid fuel missile Sajji-2 is similar in payload and range to the Shahab-3, but is however less vulnerable to pre-emptive strikes due to short launch cycles. The development of intercontinental missiles appears to have run into problems and the developments of such systems has fallen behind U.S. expectations. As a result, the main threat comes from Iranian short and medium range missiles.

North Korea and China are supporting Iran in the development of these programs; there are also rumours that the Ukraine has also delivered some key components. Russia has remained on the fence. On the one hand, Moscow is interested in strengthening its political influence and economic interest both in Iran and in the region. On the other hand, Russia is concerned about the military nuclear program as it unfolds in Iran. The decision not to supply Iran with state-of-the-art S-300 ground-to-air missiles is a testimony both to Moscow's concerns and an improvement in relations between Russia and the United States.

## **Iran's Asymmetric Warfare**

Iran is well aware that both the United States and Israel enjoy a significant military position of superiority. For this reason Iran lays great value and is concentrated on asymmetric warfare. This explains Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and why it supports Hezbollah in its conflict with Israel. Iran has invested significant sums of money in the building of the Hezbollah organisation and has supplied weapons, communications technology and training. It is estimated that Iran supports Hezbollah with approximately 100 million US \$ every year.

Such support has resulted in Israel not being able to fully realize its military ambitions in Lebanon, the asymmetric warfare strategies of Hezbollah have both forced Israel to accept the situation, and this in turn is celebrated as a victory in Tehran and the Arabian world. Tehran sees itself confirmed in its decision to concentrate on asymmetric warfare in order to achieve its stated security policy goals.

## **Oil as a Weapon**

Iran has the second largest oil reserves behind Saudi-Arabia and the second largest gas reserves behind Russia. This position of power has resulted in Iranian threats to use oil as a weapon in the case of a military attack on the country. In spite of an estimated 18 % decline in the Iranian oil capacity by 2015, such a threat would have global implications. Should Iranian oil be removed from the market the results would be a dramatic increase in the oil price and a new international economic and financial crisis. Saudi-Arabia, in the past a swing provider, would not be able to compensate for the short fall.

## **Iranian Options**

An attack by the USA or Israel on Iran would not cause a third world war. Nevertheless, Iran has the capacity to create a high degree of uncertainty and insecurity. It could, for example, ramp up its support for militant elements in Iraq and thus exert the pressure on the U.S. Iran furthermore has the capability to close the Straits of Hormuz, which, coupled with an oil export embargo, would further reduce the availability of oil as significant volumes of non-Iranian oil are shipped through the Straits.

Iran could also increase its support for Hezbollah and Hamas and encourage such groups to mount attacks against Israel. The recent visit of Iranian president Ahmadinejad to Lebanon, who sees himself as the successor of Ayatollah Khomeini, in October 2010, clearly illustrates the potential Iran sees in the mobilisation of the 80 million Shiites in the Near and Middle East for Iranian purposes. On 8 October 2010 United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said that he is very concerned by rising tensions in Lebanon and "that the country should not be used as a staging ground for further regional aspirations or to promote conflict." Furthermore, attacks of Iranian extremists cannot be excluded.

## **Consequences of Iran as a Nuclear Power**

Should Iran achieve its aims and become a regional nuclear atomic power this would have a significant impact on the distribution of military power in the region and on the possibilities open to the Iranian armed forces. Israel has frequently made it known that it would not tolerate such a situation. A conventional arms race in the region is apparent today; should

Iran become a nuclear military power we can expect a similar development on the nuclear front. Countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Egypt and Syria would seek individually or jointly to develop similar weapon systems. This would make an already instable region yet more instable. In the event of Iran achieving its aims, an attack by the United States and/or Israel on the nuclear infrastructure and oil facilities of the country are likely. The economic consequences of such an attack would be similar to an oil embargo.

Iran is an important trading partner for China and Beijing has invested approximately 40 billion US \$ in the oil and gas sector of Iran. An interruption of energy supplies caused by an embargo or a military strike would mean a short- fall of 12 % in Beijing's oil imports. Furthermore, 80 billion US \$ in development aid and hundreds of billions of US \$ linked to future energy shipments would be at risk. This situation explains China's insistence on a continued dialogue with Iran and a deep reluctance to any further escalation of sanctions. Having said that, it is worth remembering that China's relationship with the United States is of far greater importance to China than the relationship with Iran.

Any analysis of the future role of a nuclear Iran cannot ignore the one-million-dollar-question relating to the political rationality of the current leadership in Iran. The crucial question is whether the leadership would behave in a rational and predictable manner if in the possession of nuclear weapons. Israel clearly is not of the opinion and has little trust in the current leadership in Tehran. The U.S., ever hopeful, is of the conviction that diplomacy can win the day. Some political analysts believe that Iran is only seeking to become a nuclear power in order to use this as a political weapon. The two main aims are to secure the position of the religious leadership in the country and to become the major regional power. This latter point is of crucial importance for countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Iraq and the Gulf states, all of whom are deeply suspicious of Iran's intentions. Should Iran become a nuclear power, the degrees of freedom for the non-nuclear countries in the region would become severely limited. The nuclear powers U.S.A. and Israel would also have more limited options but these would not be as severe as those of the non-nuclear states in the region.

Finally, it needs to be said that sanctions and threats as well as offers of cooperation by the West have had little or no impact on the Iranian leadership. Some would argue that the threats have in fact convinced the Iranian leadership that the West is truly frightened by the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran. This in turn confirms the Iranian view that only a nuclear armed Iran is taken seriously and respected. It remains to be seen if the international community will accept an Iran which has nuclear capability but not necessarily nuclear weapons. Such a situation could be a possible compromise solution which could be acceptable to the West but possibly not to Israel. The West, together with Russia, will continue the containment policy and at the same time offer the possibility of continued dialogue. This policy is expressed clearly in the plans to jointly develop and deploy a missile defence system in Europe which is aimed at defeating the Iranian threat. Countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi-Arabia and the U.A.E., are investing heavily in missile defence systems, also aimed at containing the Iranian threat.

In our preoccupation with the Iranian missile threat we have somewhat forgotten that Iran has huge internal, structural, economic and social problems. The nuclear debate has deflected the analysis of these problems both nationally and internationally. The perceived "Western" threat serves to domestically gloss over such problems. It would make a great deal of sense for the West to include possible solutions to such problems as a part of the continued dialogue to reduce the threat of a regional nuclear conflict in the near future.

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*Remarks:*

Opinions expressed in this statement are those of the author.

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