



## **Iran: The Need to Continue a Political Dialogue**

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### **Abstract**

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As during the Cold War one needs to differentiate between Capabilities and Intentions when analysing the Iranian threat. The Intention of Iran is the Presidents statement regarding the need to destroy Israel. One way of diffusing the tension between the West and Iran would be to convince Iran to moderate this statement by saying that the aim is not to destroy the country but that Iran is vehemently opposed to both the current administration and its politics. This distinction has met with interest by academic circles in Iran, who also hold responsible positions in the Iranian Parliament. It has also been met with interest by senior politicians close to the presidency. The democratic components in Iran are somewhat limited and underdeveloped, but nevertheless exist, as does a limited degree of pluralism of opinion. It is, however, the newly created middle class who are the democratic factor in Iran and an open debate with such elements could result in this group gaining political influence.

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## ANALYSIS

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Teheran's threat to close the Straits of Hormuz in the event of the West imposing sanctions on Iran has once again put the country in the lime light. The situation has further been compounded by both the US threat to resort to force in order to reopen the Straits and by the EUs agreement in principle to impose an oil embargo. The current sanctions in force have not prevented Iran from continuing its efforts to bring its nuclear programme forward, a programme with "possible military dimensions", according to the IAEA. Imposing further sanctions will in all likelihood not deter Teheran from continuing in its efforts, it will simply encourage the regime to persevere in order to spite its perceived enemies. When Russia complied with UN imposed arms sanctions and refused to deliver S-300 Ground to Air missiles, which had been paid for, Iran reacted by rejecting plans to enrich uranium and store used rods in Russia. Further sanctions will not deter the internally divided Mullah-Regime from developing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the Iranian threat to use its oil as a weapon<sup>1</sup> will have little or no effect on the West if Saudi Arabia increases production levels.

A military solution is unlikely to have any effect as attacks from the air would not be able to take out the nuclear sites as these are located in underground sites in mountainous regions of the country. In the worst case such attacks would result in turmoil in the Middle East. The only remaining alternative is an effective dialogue with the Mullah-Regime in Teheran. The Regime's democratic components exist in a limited fashion, they are, however, in place. Such fragile structures exist as they are supported by Chomeini's ideology which allows a plurality of opinion. It should be emphasised that this ideology is still very much in place within the decision makers of the Regime.<sup>2</sup>

One solution could be to revert to the methods of analysis used during the Cold War to quantify the Soviet threat to the West. Back then we differentiated between Capabilities and Intentions. Capabilities were the ICBMs; the Intentions were the ideology of the world revolution and the support of Communist regimes outside the Soviet Union. In the Iranian case one could argue that the Capabilities are the recently tested missiles with a range of 200 km, which might in future be armed with a nuclear warhead. In this context it is interesting to note that the speaker of the Russian Ministry of Defence, Colonel Wadim Kowal, was of the opinion that Iran does not have the technological capability to build an ICBM (INTERFAX Jan 3, 2012). Intentions, on the other hand, are President Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and his statement in 2005 when he spoke of the necessity to wipe Israel off the map. This statement was not unique to the current President and goes back to Chomeini, the founder of the only Theocracy in the world today.

One way to diffuse the tensions between Iran and the West would be to encourage Iran to issue a public statement from the highest level which would qualify the 2005 statement to the effect that Teheran is not against the existence of the State of Israel, but only against the current Government and its policies. This ap-

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<sup>1</sup> Roell, Peter, Iran: Foreign and Security Policy Aspects. Rhodes Forum VIII Annual Session, World Public Forum "Dialogue of Civilizations" October 7 - 11, 2010, Rhodes Greece  
<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=122824>

<sup>2</sup> Posch, Walter, Ahmadineshad und die Prinzipalisten. Irans politische Rechte und die Perspektiven für einen neuen Elitekompromiss. Berlin 2011, p. 10 (study by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), p. 35)



proach has been noted with interest by academic circles, who also have political responsibilities in the foreign policy working groups of the Iranian Parliament. A similar interest was noted by important government officials close to the Presidency. In the autumn of 2010 the head of the Presidential Office, Maschai, encouraged to break a number of Islamic taboos such as “a rehabilitation of ancient Persian history, a school for Iranian Islamism, allowing women to participate in sporting events and even a possible friendship with the people of Israel.”<sup>3</sup>

Academic representatives, who are at the same time Mullahs, at first rejected these ideas. However, they did not reject the fact that the State of Israel was founded in 1948 by the United Nations, including all the Veto Members, and that the State is a subject of international law. Also not rejected was the notion that Iran would not be able to destroy the State of Israel.

The few elements of democratic structures in Iran can only be found in the new Islamic middle class. In any event, democracy in Iran will be strongly influenced by Islamism. Some of the Iranian reformers have made a compromise with the President of the Iranian Parliament and the leader of political Conservatism, Ali Laridschani. By this way Democracy might not be able to win the day, it will however strengthen democratic structures in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Laridschani aims to become President in 2013 as Ahmadinejad is not permitted to be elected for a third period. The President in Iran is largely that of a head of Government, the real religious leader and thus head of State is Chameini, who has been elected by the Council of Experts for life. The Council consists of 88 clerics who are elected by the people for a term of eight years. Chameini is attempting to balance the various groupings. In doing so he is working with the Guardian Council, a circle of six clerics appointed by him and a further six legal experts appointed by the Supreme Judge. This group oversees the laws passed by the Parliament.

Even if Iran were not to make use of an atomic weapon against its enemies, it would use it to make political capital and would thus advance to becoming the dominant regional power. This in turn would in all likelihood lead to the other major power in the region, Saudi Arabia, going nuclear. As a result of this, Germany would have to reconsider its position and practice less reluctance to exporting arms to Arab countries; more support of NATO in the establishment of an anti-missile system; and less pressure on the US to withdraw its nuclear weapons in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The European Union lacks a thought out policy in Iran; its current policy is nuclear-centric. Germany, the only non-veto country in discussions with Iran over its nuclear programme, is listened to with great interest in Iran. It would be a positive move if Germany were to lobby for a continuation of the dialog. Iran also seems interested in a continuation of the dialogue and has offered to continue talks with the EU at the beginning of 2012. A short term objective of such talks should be securing Iran’s willingness to allow the IAEO to inspect whatever they want in Iran. A further aim should be discussion covering other areas of interest to both parties which in turn would give political support to the Iranian middle class.

<sup>3</sup> Posch *ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Posch *ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Thränert, Oliver, *Atommacht Iran? Der Preis wäre hoch*, in: *Tagesspiegel*, Jan 3, 2012, p. 6.



*Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*

### **About the Author of this Issue**

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