

# LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

## *The history of Iran*

Iran, Turkey and Egypt are considered the regional superpowers in the Middle East with a decisive influence on the development in the region. The US, Europe, and Russia have an interest in Iran due to its oil; the US is particularly interested in the relationship between Iran and Israel. Iran has a certain role in the region due to its natural resources and its self image as the protector of Shiat Ali, the Shia Muslims. The country has not started a war with its neighbours for many centuries; there is traditional antagonism, however, towards Saudi Arabia and especially towards Iraq.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian experiences with the western world have not been the best. Progressive groups in the country wished to develop and democratise the country, but were hindered by Russia, Germany, and the UK who acted in their own colonial interests. In 1941, the ruling Reza Shah was forced to resign, and was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeq wanted to nationalize foreign, mainly British, oil companies. In a coup d'état, Mossadeq was dismissed in 1953. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had good relations with the US, but gradually turned into an autocrat. He wished to "westernize" the country by decreasing the influence of religion on society and by prohibiting women using the shawl. Both socialist and Islamic groups were seriously oppressed. The secret police, with its particularly cruel methods of torture, combined with the Shah's extravagant way of life increased people's dislike of him. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution took place, and a national vote confirmed the new Islamic republic of Iran. Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini became the highest leader of the country according to the new theocratic constitution (a constitution built on religious principles).

In November 1979 a group of students attacked the American embassy in Teheran and held its staff hostage. The students demanded that the US exchange the Shah, at that time hospitalized in the US due to a blood disease, for the staff of the embassy. The hostage drama continued for 444 days. When President Reagan succeeded President Jimmy Carter, who was highly unpopular in Iran, the hostages were released.

Under the religious leadership, the Iranian army had largely been dissolved. In September 1980, Iran was attacked by Iraq. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein expected to quickly conquer certain oil-rich areas of Iran. He was politically and financially supported by the US and its allies, by the Soviet Union and its allies, and by China. Iraq used chemical weapons against military and civilian targets in Iran, with few protests from the international community. The war ended in 1988, with an estimated Iranian death toll ranging from half a million to one million.



Photo: Erland Richardsson

### *Politics and governance*

The Iranian form of government is complicated. It is a theocracy, with religious leaders in the highest positions. The prevailing system was introduced during Ayatollah Khomeini's years in power. The priesthood does not have a strong tradition in Persian history, and younger religious leaders have questioned the theocratic system.

The Supreme Leader, the highest religious leader of Iran, determines Iran's policies. He is also the Commander-in-Chief of the army and appoints half of the members of the Council of Guardians, who in turn appoint or dismiss The Supreme Leader. The president is subordinate to the religious leader. The president is elected in public elections, but the candidates must be approved by the Council of Guardians. The Council also approves candidates to the parliament, majlis. Military groups, especially the Revolutionary Guard, have a large influence outside the established political system.

President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) tried to negotiate and establish good relations with the western world, which was one reason for his dismissal. The 2005 presidential elections were won by the religious fundamentalist Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, largely due to his nationalism and relentless position against the US and the western world.

Photo: Wenjing Tao



### *Iran's nuclear program*

Before the Islamic revolution, under the Shah, a comprehensive nuclear power programme was planned. In 1974, an ambitious plan to build no fewer than 23 reactors before the year 2000 was presented. One reason given was decreasing oil resources, and the long-term need for alternative sources of energy. The only electricity-producing reactor built, however, is the Bushehr reactor that, as of April 2008, had not been started due to difficulties in nuclear fuel delivery from abroad.

This reactor is a so-called light-water reactor, not suitable for production of weapons-grade plutonium.

An agreement was signed in 1974 between the US and Iran, on delivery of a plutonium reprocessing facility that can also be used to produce weapons-grade



material. But Iran has only produced very small amounts of plutonium in its research reactors.<sup>1</sup> In 1974, the CIA speculated that Iran might develop a nuclear weapons capacity in the event that India and Pakistan became nuclear weapon states.<sup>2</sup> Also, there was a constant worry that Iraq might acquire nuclear weapons.

*Photo: Erland Richardsson*

Soon after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the government announced a plan to resume the nuclear programme. Iran is a member of the NPT and is thereby subject to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA was also to assist in the development of a facility for uranium enrichment, as Iran had experienced problems in reliable delivery of nuclear fuel. This problem has remained throughout the years due to political pressure.

In 2002, a group of dissidents revealed that Iran had commenced building a facility for the enrichment of uranium and an industry for the production of heavy water. These facilities had not been reported to the IAEA, and Iran claimed this was not necessary as no uranium had been produced in the facilities. IAEA studies showed that for many years Iran had not reported activities in its nuclear programme that it was obliged to report.

Iran, like many of the nuclear weapon producing states, has not ratified the IAEA Additional Protocol that would bind Iran to comprehensive IAEA inspections. For a period of time, however, the country abided voluntarily by these regulations. Iran

also halted its uranium enrichment for a period of time to facilitate negotiations between Iran and a group of states called the EU-3: France, the UK, and Germany. This was followed by a time of problems cooperating with the IAEA. However, IAEA officials and its Director Mohammad El Baradei claimed progress in the cooperation and called for it to continue. The IAEA could find no evidence that the Iranian nuclear programme aimed at nuclear weapons production. In February 2006, the IAEA Board of Governors decided to bring the Iran issue to the UN Security Council.

### *Does Iran plan to go nuclear?*

It is not possible to give an objective and balanced summary of all arguments presented by different players on this question, but this is an attempt.

In general, it is not financially sensible for a country of Iran's size to build a uranium enrichment facility, especially with only one functioning nuclear power plant. It is much cheaper to buy uranium. Iran has often been denied deliveries of nuclear fuel and other technology for political reasons. It is understandable that Iran feels the need to be self-sufficient regarding nuclear fuel. Building such an advanced facility successfully would strengthen national confidence, which is an important explanation for Iran's nuclear programme.

With a functioning facility for uranium enrichment for nuclear power plant use, it is a short step to uranium enrichment for nuclear weapons use. Once the facility works properly, it would be possible for Iran to terminate cooperation with the IAEA, drive



away the inspectors, and begin production of weapons-grade uranium. If properly prepared in advance, a small number of functioning nuclear devices could be produced within a few years. This, obviously, could not be done as long as cooperation with the IAEA continues; meaning Iran's intention to produce nuclear weapons would quickly be detected.

*Photo: Erland Richardsson*

A uranium-based nuclear weapon does not need to be tested, as was the case with the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Iran is unlikely to have enough plutonium to produce plutonium-based nuclear weapons.

The former religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons. The fatwa – a religious decree – states that Islam prohibits production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons and that the Islamic Republic of Iran would never acquire such weapons. The fatwa was delivered in a statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in August 2005, during an emergency meeting on Iran’s nuclear intentions. When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave his inauguration speech in early August 2005 he underlined that his government is against nuclear weapons and will only pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.<sup>3</sup> It is not certain, however, that the next religious and political leaders will share the same view.

Possibly, Iran only wants to show the rest of the world and its own people that it is capable of producing a nuclear weapon and managing the full nuclear fuel chain from uranium mining to building a nuclear-capable missile. This could be enough for the national confidence. Iran would then be in a position similar to that of Japan in relation to China. This would be enough to raise the status of Iran in relation to its neighbours and could be used in certain situations as blackmail against the US and Israel.

Today, Iranian political leaders and many Iranian citizens believe that Iran cannot trust any other state. They experience the denial of Iran’s legal right to a peaceful nuclear programme under the NPT as humiliating. No state party to the NPT should be denied the right to enrich uranium for nuclear power purposes. The naming of Iran by the US as one of the “axis of evil” strengthens national solidarity, and many Iranians wish to see a complete, nationally owned nuclear fuel cycle. But actual production of nuclear weapons would lead to further international isolation, and eventually maybe a military attack by the US or Israel.

Many commentators claim it is important for Iran to show its capacity to produce nuclear weapons, while actual production is regarded as too risky. But in Iran, different actors with different interests can be found, some of them less than rational given that an escalation of tensions might lead to misunderstandings and mistakes and to a devastating war that favours no one.

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1 Iran Fokus <http://www.iranfocus.com/>

2 <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB240/snief.pdf> Prospects for Further Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Special National Intelligence Estimate, CIA, 23 August 1974, SNIE 4-1-74

3 <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/nuke/mehr080905.html>