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Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: From Well-Being to Wahhabism

Introduction

From the onset of Iran's existence as a revolutionary state, the ruling Iranian regime has attempted to balance Iran's development in the international system with its nuclear ambitions. Simply put, the importance of understanding this pursuit lies in the far-reaching consequences of a nuclear Iran, such as the desire for nuclear proliferation in other Middle Eastern countries and the potential for further destabilization of the region. Thus, the goal of this paper is to understand the intricacies in Iran's nuclear ambitions, to investigate the validity of other proposed explanations for this phenomenon, and to discover how those explanations fit into a broader scheme of Iran's methodology. In essence, Iran's nuclear ambitions are far more related to the preservation of theocratic rule than its antagonistic foreign relationships. Although many propose that Iran's nuclear ambitions are largely a result of its contentious relationships with Israel, the United States, and Western ideologies, this paper will argue that Iran's primary motivation for obtaining a nuclear weapon lies within two intrinsically linked factors: deterring civil unrest and the obstruction of exported Saudi-Arabian Wahhabism. As such, an analysis of Iran's actions since the 1979 Iranian Revolution will reveal that its foreign policy decisions and contentious foreign relations, are, to a great extent, symptoms of its citizens' social and economic struggles and Iran's recognition, based on examples in other areas of the Far East, of the Wahhabist threat to its regime.

Historical Backdrop

When analyzing the current situation regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions, it helps to contextualize Iran's nuclear program in a more comprehensive way. From the onset of the 1950s



until the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Shah sought to attain nuclear material, primarily in the form of potential energy streams (Barzashka, Oelrich 4). Post-revolution, however, and after years of criticizing the Shah's nuclear program as excessive and corrupt, the mullahs found new use for the nuclear program in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s (Bahgat 27). As such, the Iranian regime increasingly began to view nuclear power as an arm of its potential military capabilities and a defining aspect of the revolutionary state. To quote Shahram Chubin in his book *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, "In Iran's case, the default position in its foreign policy has been one of obstructionism, due as much to its worldview as to its response to the strategic environment. (Chubin 14). Iran's depiction of its ascension to the ranks of states mastering nuclear technology...gives Iran greater weight internationally (Chubin 26)." All in all, we can see the transition that Iran has made in its nuclear pursuit, namely, from one of practical energy necessity to a strategic and integral part of its politics. As the paper progresses, this evolution will be examined in terms of the duality of Iran's domestic affairs and foreign policy decisions.

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: The Alternative Explanations

Before the proposed theories for Iran's nuclear ambitions can be explored, a discussion must take place regarding the consensus around alternative explanations for Iran's nuclear program. For the most part, many conclude that Iran desires nuclear weapons due its animosity towards Israel. According to Kenneth Waltz, a leading political scientist, Israel's undeniable military advantage is the reason why the Middle East is severely unbalanced. This "asymmetry of power" describes Iran's desire to offset Israel's nuclear supremacy by brandishing nuclear weapons of its own (Tobia). Additionally, Iran seeks nuclear weapons to bolster its efforts in the proxy conflicts it engages with Israel. With the potential backdrop of nuclear weapons, the already tense conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon would only be exacerbated. On the Israeli side, the



threat of Iran has become a unifying issue when it comes to national security, especially in light of the Israeli consensus around Iran's radical hegemonic goals. For Israel, this revolutionary force is attempting to wield its influence in four distinct methods: the nuclear project, the support for terrorist groups in and around Israel, the attempts to undermine pragmatic Arab regimes such as the UAE and Egypt, and through ideological-theological threats of Israel's imminent destruction. In summation, Israel is cognizant of Iran's effort to lead the Muslim world by utilizing anti-Israel stances to bolster Iran's regional legitimacy among Arab populations. Hence, Iran desires nuclear weapons (Kaye 23-25).

Secondly, many propose that Iran desires nuclear weapons to oppose perceived aggression from the United States, whether ongoing or future, as well as to fend off the infiltration of Western Influence (Hurst 29; 84-86). On the Iranian side, the United States is seen as the regime's most prominent adversarial threat, a stance that is deeply rooted in decades of the United States' involvement in Iranian affairs. This deep-seated resentment began around 1953, when the United States, through the actions of the CIA, overthrew Iran's democratically elected government and supported Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Seen as the harbinger of Western ideals and modernization, Pahlavi was viewed by many Iranians as a Western "puppet" who prioritized the needs of Western imperial powers, the U.S and Great Britain, over the Iranian people (Hurst 63). After the 1979 revolution, the United States and Iran have struggled for regional supremacy. Since the revelation of Iran's nuclear facilities in 2002, however, tensions have worsened due to Iran's pursuit of a potential nuclear weapons program and its increased support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Shi'a insurgents in Iraq, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to the Ayatollah Khamenei, the United States has, and currently is, engaging in ideological warfare against the Islamic Republic, and is hell-bent on enacting regime



change to develop an “independent” Iran beholden to Western interests. This perceived regime-change strategy is not blatantly militaristic, it includes psychological and cultural warfare and the fomenting of internal instability in Iran. As such, many Iranians believe that nuclear weapons can deter the United States from undermining its resistance to Western domination of Middle Eastern affairs (Kaye 57-58).

Proposed Explanations

Now that mainstream theories behind Iran’s nuclear ambitions have been examined, the theory that this paper will argue can now be explored. First off, this paper will argue that Iran’s nuclear ambitions are far more domestically driven. To explain, as a result of myriad internal issues, as well as foreign economic sanctions, the Iranian people are indisputably living in precarious economic times. High inflation is just one of the economic pressures that Iranians face, let alone the various social pressures that they are subjected to, such as strict social codes and Sharia law. As such, antagonism against the US and Israel are symptoms of the civil unrest in Iran rather than the reason for Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Consequently, the Iranian regime uses nuclear procurement as a distraction from the plight of Iranians by rallying its citizens around the nationalistic endeavor of attaining nuclear weapons.

Additionally, this paper will argue that Iran desires nuclear weapons in order to prevent the infiltration of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. Simply put, Iran views Wahhabism as a threat to the stability of its regime. Using the case study of China’s Uighur Muslims, this paper seeks to prove that Iran is trying to avoid the various internal problems that arise from the spread of Wahhabist ideology. Essentially, the Iranian regime believes that nuclear weapons can deter Saudi Arabia from destabilizing Iran through its exportation of Wahhabism. The problem that lies in investigating this theory, however, is the comparative lack of intellectual discussion



around the issue of Wahhabism. Presumptively, this reality can be described in a few ways. For one thing, it is not in Saudi Arabia's interest to have an investigation into its foundational ideology. To prevent any religious or social reform, the state will issue a fatwa, a religious decree, against any supposed enemy of the state. These fatwas can be life-threatening, as many radical individuals desire martyrdom by violently enforcing fatwas, whether it be by flogging or murder in the name of jihad. As such, journalists, political scientists, and religious reform activists are afraid of writing about the dangers of Wahhabism because they fear a fatwa being issued against them (United Nations Refugee Agency). As a result, this paper will try to fill in some of the gaps when it comes to the consequences of Wahhabism, particularly when it comes to Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Iran's Domestic Playbook: The Revolutionary Economy

The next following pages will discuss the domestic theory of Iran's nuclear ambitions and Iran's system of dealing with domestic issues, a framework which they have employed since the inception of the Islamic Republic. To explain, the early revolutionary economy must be investigated in order to fully understand how the mullah regime deals with internal domestic issues. Because the Iranian Revolution was in large part due to economic stresses, there was no choice for the Islamic Republic other than to project a strong and optimistic outlook for Iranian citizens. When that could not be achieved, and as the paper will show, Iran developed a method for distracting its citizens from their economic woes: rallying them around a nationalistic endeavor. Iran's current desire for nuclear weapons thus represents another nationalistic endeavor for the regime to maintain its legitimacy and distract the people of Iran from the bleak economic outlooks that have been realized post the Nuclear Agreement with the United States.



By 1976, the economy of the Shah's Iran was beginning to implode; imports were not steady, there were many shortages of necessary infrastructure, and inflation rose sharply on food and housing prices. By early 1979, Iran's developing economy had run out of control. The period of massive spending was coming to an end, growth declined further, and there was a jump in unemployment. Inflation mostly affected the poor, but the majority of Iranians were not immune to the faltering economy; rents were high for the middle class and poor alike. In essence, the sense of economic crisis only fueled the political uncertainty for those who had forgiven the regime for other domestic shortcomings (Axworthy 98-99).

Though there were other contributing factors to Iranians' disillusionment with the Shah, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini exploited the economic grievances of Iran's poor and middle class, and eventually led them into the Iranian Revolution. In a surprisingly quick turn of events, the monarchy was overthrown and the Islamic Republic was coming into shape. However, the initial days of the new regime were also rife with economic problems. To quote Suzanne Maloney in her article titled, *Iran Primer: The Revolutionary Economy*,

“After two years of disruptions to the economy, the post-revolutionary turmoil put the country on the brink of economic collapse. As such, all sectors of the Iranian economy showed severe decline during the first several years of the revolution”

(Maloney 2010).

The Power of External Conflict: The Iran-Iraq War Model

With an economy in decline, the regime was about to give the Iranian people the ultimate distraction: an 8 year war with Iraq. After Iraq's 1980 invasion, the Iranian government was forced to strengthen its economic policy. However, the Iranian economy never fully recovered from the revolutionary turmoil, and in 1985, a collapse in oil prices severely constrained Iran's



capacity to import goods required to maintain industrial production. On the whole, “the eight-year conflict gave the regime a convenient excuse for expansion of the state sector and the precipitous decline in general living standards” (Maloney 2010). According to historian Ephraim Karsh in his book titled, *The Iran–Iraq War: 1980–1988*,

“The Iranian government saw the outbreak of war as a chance to strengthen its position and consolidate the Islamic revolution, noting that government propaganda presented it domestically as a glorious jihad and a test of Iranian national character. The Iranian regime followed a policy of total war from the beginning, and attempted to mobilise the nation as a whole. They established a group known as the Reconstruction Campaign, whose members were exempted from conscription and were instead sent into the countryside to work on farms to replace the men serving at the front. Iranian workers had a day's pay deducted from their pay cheques every month to help finance the war, and mass campaigns were launched to encourage the public to donate food, money, and blood. To further help finance the war, the Iranian government banned the import of all non-essential items, and launched a major effort to rebuild the damaged oil plants” (Karsh 1-8, 12-16, 19-82).

From the Iraqi perspective, the Iranians, possibly feeling less of an allegiance to Revolutionary Iran given its economic struggles, would draw out a counter-revolution in Iran that would overthrow Khomeini's government and secure an Iraqi victory. The Iranian regime recognized that the country could not afford the war's toll on the economy or society. The costs of war were enormous, productivity plummeted, urban poverty doubled, per capita income dropped by 45 percent, and price controls and strict rationing of basic consumer goods failed to prevent rampant inflation. However, the nationalistic fervor that the regime instilled in the people had not abated.



The Iranian government gave cash payments to families of soldiers and went on a massive campaign to brand fallen soldiers as martyrs. Thus, rather than turning against the revolutionary government, as experts had predicted, Iran's people, including Iranian Arabs, rallied in support of the country and put up a stiff resistance (Woods 9).

Iran's Domestic Problems

Now that Iran's playbook for dealing with domestic issues has been established, we can now focus on the current economic and social situation in Iran and how the nuclear program is again an example of a distraction for its citizens.

In 2015, the Iran Nuclear Deal was signed between Iran, the U.S, and other world powers, to curb Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. According to the Central Bank of Iran, Iran saw GDP growth of 12.3% in the year following the agreement, giving many Iranians an optimistic outlook for their economic situation (Amadeo 2019). After President Donald Trump decided to reinstate sanctions in 2018 and pursue his "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran, a myriad of economic problems were to ensue. For one, the value of Iran's currency has plummeted; this sharp devaluation is only fueled by the high demand for foreign currency among Iranian citizens who bear the reality of lost savings and diminished purchasing power. This currency struggle particularly affects the import of basic goods and necessities. For example, many medical suppliers have refused to work with Iran to avoid a fallout with the U.S, thereby increasing the price of critical drugs and other medical equipment. Additionally, living costs have increased dramatically; inflation in Iran has risen to above 42%. The World Bank estimates that food-related inflation, particularly for meat, has risen 116% since sanctions have been reimposed. Nearly a quarter of all restaurants in Tehran have shut down, and food rationing has been reimposed for the first time since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. For Iranians, the price



of oil has doubled, with no signs of slowing down. The obvious impact of this economic hardship was widespread protests that broke out in November 2019, which was brutally quashed by authorities. The crackdown left at least 208 people dead and thousands injured, according to Amnesty International. The Iranian government, however, promptly dismissed these figures as “utter lies” (Six Charts That Show How Hard US Sanctions Have Hit Iran, 2019).

In addition, there are many social issues that are promoting civil unrest and presenting a dilemma for the Iranian regime. Iran continues to issue the death penalty for what it labels as “apostasy,” including same-sex relations, adultery, and certain non-violent drug-related offenses. Iranian law also punishes more than 100 offenses, such as drinking alcoholic beverages and extramarital sex, with flogging. Iranian women face discrimination in matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. In Iran, a married woman is forbidden from traveling outside the country without permission from her husband. Under civil law, a husband can prevent his wife from having certain occupations if he deems them inappropriate. Iranians do not have the right to freely assemble and express their anger at their economic and social stagnation; the Iranian government repeatedly blocks access to the internet and its various social media platforms during times of protest (Roth 2019).

Iran’s Current Nuclear Ambitions: The Playbook Revisited

All in all, we can see that Iran uses international conflict and “nationalistic” pursuits to distract its population from internal struggles. The Iranian regime understands that the previously mentioned social and economic pressures exist, and as such, it will try to prevent regime change by any means necessary. This ultimately means that Iran’s foreign policy and nuclear ambitions serve to distract the population from their social and economic problems. To quote Scott Sagan in his article titled, *Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb*,



“From this domestic politics perspective, nuclear weapons programs are not obvious or inevitable solutions to international security problems; instead, nuclear weapons programs are solutions looking for a problem to which to attach themselves so as to justify their existence. Potential threats to a state's security certainly exist in the international system, but in this model, international threats are seen as being more malleable and more subject to interpretation, and can therefore produce a variety of responses from domestic actors. Security threats are therefore not the central cause of weapons decisions according to this model: they are merely windows of opportunity through which parochial interests can jump” (Sagan 65).

These external conflicts are manifested in antagonism against the U.S, Israel, and Western ideology as a whole. As discussed previously, Iran understands that civil unrest can ensue as a result of economic and social pressures. This civil unrest is very threatening to the stability of the Iranian regime, and thus, the U.S, Israel, and Westernism are very convenient scape-goats for those pressures. Rhetorically speaking, it's much easier for the regime to give the Iranian people external forces to blame for their domestic problems than it is to actually solve them. When it comes to Israel, the Iranian mullahs can easily profess anti-Semitism to the people to paint the international economy as a Zionist entity, America can be painted as the imperialist colonizer, and Western ideals can be branded as poison to Iranian society. However, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is what allows the mullahs to tie all of these external conflicts into one cohesive nationalistic, and even prophetic, mission. Ultimately, this nuclear nationalistic fervor quiets the internal strife of the Iranian people and lulls them into accepting their domestic issues as irrelevant when compared to their “foreign issues.”



Wahhabism Theory: What is Wahhabism?

Now that the domestic theory behind Iran's nuclear ambitions has been explored, preventing the spread of Wahhabism can now be proposed as an equal motive for Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, we must first understand what Wahhabism specifically is, including its origins, overall belief system, and how that belief system is manifested as a threat to the survival of the Iranian regime.

Simply put, "Wahhabism" is a general term for a branch of Islam that refers first and foremost to the teachings of the 18th-century Arabian preacher and activist, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. He was an ultra-conservative, far-right, religious zealot who believed in a myriad of things that his fellow Muslims did not. His main philosophy, which would ultimately come to define the Wahhabist movement, was that Muslims who would not follow his brand of Islam were subject to a violent death under jihad, justified by holy war in the name of God (Firro 30-44). In 1744, ibn Adb al-Wahhab made a pact with a local chief from the Saud tribe, who controlled a vast agricultural settlement in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula. The pact stipulated that Saud would raise a holy militia guided by Wahhabism; these militias would raid nearby settlements and forcibly convert the residents to Wahhabism. Once they were converted, al-Wahhab would teach his ideology, part of which included mandatory taxation and obedience to their new king, Saud. What resulted is the current kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (Firro 45-46).

Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia

Once the Saud family gained power they continued their rule by ensuring that the population was well indoctrinated with Wahhabist ideology. Throughout history, and even today, every Saudi Arabian is taught Wahhabism in school, in their mosques, and on television.



However, it is estimated that 40% of the population believes in Wahhabism. Another thing to note is that Wahhabists represent a very small minority among the world's Muslims; there are approximately 4.56 million Wahhabis in the Persian Gulf region, with about 4 million from Saudi Arabia (Analyses-Wahhabism). For context, there are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims, which means that Wahhabists only make up 0.253% of the entire Muslim population (Lipka 2017).

In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism is the state-sponsored religion. Some Wahhabi tenets are: No object of worship other than God, rejection of the use of holy intermediaries to win the favor of God, no name but God's to be cited in prayer. These three principles are the basis of the zealous Wahhabi rejection of saints or icons, Muslim or otherwise. For example, the Taliban's decision to destroy ancient statues of Buddha was influenced by Wahhabi backers. Additionally, the police in Saudi Arabia enforces Wahhabist beliefs such as: the prohibitions against smoking, shaving, and abusive language, and the rejection of leadership roles for women. Wahhabists believe in a literal definition of the Quran, which entails jurisprudence based on Shariah law and fervent rejection of all innovations not directly advancing Islam (Encyclopedia Britannica 2018).

Wahhabism Without Borders

Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia has employed a variety of methods to spread Wahhabist ideology beyond its borders. For example, Saudi control over the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, has been used as an instrument of hegemony over Islam. This jurisdiction gives Saudi Arabia the ability to provide Qurans and other printed materials that promote Wahhabism. Additionally, after the discovery of Saudi Arabian oil in 1939, the kingdom had the monetary wherewithal to invest in mosques all over the world. More



importantly, the kingdom received ideological control over the imams (preachers) in those mosques. Consequently, the number of Wahhabist mosques in many Muslim-majority countries, such as Qatar, the UAE, Pakistan, etc, grew vastly, and is continuing to grow. For the most part, the danger of Wahhabism, particularly when it comes to other Muslim majority countries, is how the extremist tenets of Wahhabism lead to violence. Wahhabism professes jihad against non-Muslims, though non-Wahhabi Muslims face a greater danger, as they are perceived as the primary infidels of Islam. Additionally, there is a plethora of evidence to show that Saudi Arabia currently encourages this violent jihad. According to internal documents from the U.S. Treasury Department, a prominent Saudi charity, the International Islamic Relief Organization, heavily supported by members of the Saudi royal family, showed “support for terrorist organizations” at least through 2006 (Lichtbau 2009).

In addition, the tenets of Wahhabism can be shown to have influenced terror organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. ISIS, for instance, has been described as both more violent than al-Qaeda and more closely aligned with Wahhabism. In the words of David Kirkpatrick of *The New York Times*, “For their guiding principles, the leaders of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, are open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group's territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van” (Kirkpatrick 2014).

Saudi Arabian Wahhabism: The Iranian Opposition

Now that it has been established that Saudi Arabia is conducting a concerted effort to export Wahhabism beyond its borders, and that Wahhabist ideology can cause destabilizing



violence and terror, we can understand why Wahhabism is considered a threat by the Iranian regime. For the most part, the Iranian Revolution was a rejection of Saudi Wahhabism. First off, it was a Shi'a Islam Revolution, which is seen as perverted Islam in Wahhabists' eyes. Nevertheless, the massive popularity of the overthrow of a U.S.-allied secular monarchy generated enthusiasm among not just Shi'a Muslims, but Sunni Muslims as well. However, it became clear that Iran's new supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini was no fan of Saudi Wahhabism. He called for the overthrow of the al-Saud family, and in 1987, he said, "these vile and ungodly Wahhabis are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back. Mecca is in the hands of "a band of heretics." All in all, this spurred Saudi Arabia to redouble their efforts to counter Iran and spread Wahhabism around the world, reversing any moves by Saudi leaders to distance itself from Wahhabism or "soften" its ideology (Commins 171).

Above all, Iran views Wahhabism as a threat to its regime. It is cognizant of the problems that arise from Wahhabism's spread in various states, viewing examples of Wahhabist-caused domestic instability as potential foreshadowing for the downfall of the Islamic Republic. Simply put, this threat is actualized because Iran witnesses the exportation of Wahhabism into China and recognizes the damaging consequences that China is currently subject to. As such, the paper must now delve into China's struggle with the Wahhabist infiltration into its Uighur Muslim population, the Chinese recognition of the threat, and the Iranian implications of China's domestic problems with Wahhabism. Additionally, the paper will conclude that Iran seeks nuclear weapons to deter Saudi Arabia from their deliberate goal of destabilizing Iran by spreading Wahhabism within its borders.

China's Uighur Muslims: A Case Study For Iran



In order to understand China's current struggle with its Muslim Uighurs, it would be beneficial to get a better understanding of who the Uighurs are and where they originated. Modern western scholars can not exactly pinpoint the ethnic origins of the Uighur population, as the area of China that they reside in, Xinjiang, has been conquered by various different groups over the past 1000 years. Consequently, the Uighurs have constantly adopted various cultures and religions throughout history, adapting them over time. Over the past century, the Uighurs have identified as Sunni Muslims under the Sufi school of Islam, a more mystical version of traditional Islam. Within the past few decades, however, there has been an influx of Wahhabism into the region (Gonul and Rogenhofer 7-9).

To understand this phenomenon, it helps to go back to the conflicts between China and Russia in the early 20th century. In the 1940s, Stalin's strategy was to weaken other countries by supporting separatist movements in various regions. In China's case, Stalin supported uprisings in the province of Xinjiang; Xinjiang Muslims, some separatists and some Han Chinese loyalists, were pitted against each other in the fighting. China was ultimately victorious and it consolidated its rule over Xinjiang. However, what resulted was tremendous animosity toward the Russians (Millward 208).

Fast-forwarding to the 1960s-80s, and China makes a mistake that will lay the foundation for its current Uighur Muslim problems: China decided to support and arm the mujahadin, Islamic guerrilla fighters, in Afghanistan. At that time, China wanted to combat the spread of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, so it allowed the mujahedin to set up camps in Xinjiang and it allowed the Uighur Muslims to join in on the fighting. To incentivize the Muslims to fight, China concurrently allowed the Muslims of Xinjiang to make pilgrimage to Mecca for the first time (Starr 157). However, because it was an expensive journey, the various Uighur Muslim



communities would sponsor their imams to make pilgrimage. While in Saudi Arabia, the imams were recruited by Saudi Arabian Wahhabists to bring Wahhabism back to the Uighur Muslims. As such, some of the Uighur Muslims were being radicalized on two fronts: from fighting alongside the radical mujahedin, and from the indoctrination from their imams, who believed they were returning the Uighurs to “the true form of Islam” (Gonul and Rogenhofer 10-12). Within a 5-10 year span, terror attacks began in Xinjiang region. In essence, radicalized Uighurs were fighting to live under Wahhabist Sharia law and were attempting to create an autonomous country from China. From the 1990s and into the 2000s, the Wahhabist Uighurs carried out many bus bombings and knife attacks against non-Muslim residents of Xinjiang. Particularly from 2011-2017, there was a sharp increase in the number of terror attacks, with the vast majority of them being committed by Wahhabist Uighur Muslims (Gonul and Rogenhofer 12-14). Farah Pandith, the U.S Special Representative to Muslim nations, provided personal evidence of the Saudi Arabian infiltration of Xinjiang during her visit to the region, testifying to the concerted radicalization of the people to act against China (Pandith 2019).

Consequently, China understands that Saudi Arabia’s export of Wahhabism is an existential threat because it radicalizes Muslims to the point that they attempt to overthrow governments in the hopes of attaining autonomous land run by Wahhabist ideology. Thus, in China’s view, the Wahhabist Uighur Muslims must be targeted and put into “re-education camps” to eliminate the violence that has been ensuing. Iran, therefore, has adopted this same premise; the regime is afraid that an influx of Wahhabism will inspire a portion of the population to violently demand an overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

All in all, Iran is cognizant of Wahhabism’s power to radicalize Muslims and indoctrinate them to commit acts of jihad against the nation state. Essentially, Iran desires nuclear weapons to



deter Saudi Arabia from using its vast influence, whether it be monetary or religious, to destabilize Iran and potentially topple the regime. Though it seems like a relatively excessive pushback, nuclear weapons, in Iran's eyes, could represent a powerful enough influence to combat Saudi Arabia's desire for regional and foreign dominance with its own hegemony, whether it be purely militaristic or a defense of Islam. To explain, and as was stated previously, Saudi Arabia is using its control over Mecca and Medina as an instrument of hegemony over Islam. Not to be understated, this gives Saudi Arabia a particular edge in the realm of ideological "warfare." However, this power can potentially be held in check by Iranian nuclear weapons. Put simply, nuclear weapons would be able to compel Saudi Arabia to keep Mecca and Medina ideologically neutral and to keep Wahhabism confined within its borders. In addition, nuclear weapons would give Iran overall dominance in the region, and as the major Shiite power in the Middle East, an ideological advantage over Sunni Islam. In the end, we can clearly see that Iran's nuclear ambitions have one overarching goal: the survival of its theocratic regime. When it comes to Saudi Arabia, this desire is exemplified by the regime's staunch opposition to exported Saudi Wahhabism and its destabilizing effects.

Conclusion

To summarize, the main pursuit of this paper was to examine the theories behind Iran's nuclear ambitions, to investigate the validity of proposed explanations for this phenomenon, and to discover how those explanations fit into a broader scheme of Iran's methodology. Through extensive research, taking into account the vast historical circumstances, it was discovered that Iran's nuclear ambitions are defined by the regime's necessity for self-preservation, rather than its antagonistic foreign relationships. Although it is widely believed that Iran's nuclear ambitions are a result of its contentious relationships with Israel, the United States, and Western ideologies,



this paper concluded that Iran's primary motivation for obtaining a nuclear weapon lies within its desire to deter civil unrest and to obstruct exported Saudi-Arabian Wahhabism. Thus, an analysis of Iran's history revealed that its foreign policy is, to a great extent, a symptom of Iran's social and economic struggles and Iran's recognition, based on China's Uighur Muslim problems, of the Wahhabist threat to its regime. Further research should be conducted on other examples of Wahhabist infiltration and the problems that it causes, such as being the driving ideology of terror groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as research pertaining to how the U.S has possibly promoted Saudi Arabia's exportation of Wahhabism as a means to destabilize certain adversarial countries.

Given everything that has been stated in this paper, we can conclude that the Western approach to Iran must shift. If the West's goal is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, it would be more beneficial to address the theories that have been proposed in this paper. Essentially, if nuclear weapons are a distraction from domestic problems, actions such as lifting sanctions and re-entering the Iran Nuclear Deal would improve the Iranian economy and provide the regime with a reason to delay, or even stop, its nuclear hegemony. Lastly, Saudi Arabian Wahhabism would have to be addressed, with an international effort being led to deter Saudi Arabia from exporting Wahhabism to Iran and other countries around the globe. This could be done by refusing to sell U.S arms to Saudi Arabia or by isolating Saudi Arabia at international bodies such as the United Nations.



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