

**Why Iran is Choosing Nuclear Hedging**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities through the lens of "nuclear hedging," a strategy of maintaining the potential to develop nuclear weapons without overtly doing so. The analysis examines Iran's motivations, including a desire for regional dominance, security concerns arising from past regime changes in the Middle East, and the prestige associated with nuclear weapons.

The abstract then defines nuclear hedging and details Iran's possible reasons for adopting this approach. This includes maintaining a negotiating advantage, deterring potential military intervention, and achieving recognition as a regional power.

Furthermore, the abstract highlights Iran's use of strategic ambiguity, employing mixed messaging through government officials to both reassure the international community and retain the option for rapid nuclear development. The collapse of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and subsequent enrichment activities beyond civilian needs are presented as evidence of this strategy.

Finally, the abstract acknowledges the challenges Iran faces in sustaining nuclear hedging, including the economic burden and the lack of a clear delivery system for potential weapons. It concludes by emphasizing the potential consequences of a failed hedging strategy, including regional conflict and the possibility of Iran becoming a full-fledged nuclear power.

**Keywords:** Iran, nuclear hedging, nuclear weapons, JCPOA, regional power, Middle East

Iran is a nation steeped in history and culture while trying to walk the line between modernity and tradition. It once shared deep diplomatic and military ties with the west, but since the Iranian Revolution, has embraced religious law and came into conflict with Sunni neighbors and western nations. Many in Iran feel that they are destined for regional greatness, hawking back to the Persian conquests of the Greco-Roman era and the Golden Age of Islam one thousand years ago which gave birth to military power, science, medicine, wealth, and culture. Now, with Shia hardliners dominating the Iranian government, an attempted rebirth is driving Iran to regain the dominance it once enjoyed in the region. Nuclear weapons, the ultimate military capability in the arsenals of the world's powers, would give Iran the security, prestige, and diplomatic recognition the present-day Iranians have not seen in hundreds of years. Iran seeks to accomplish this through nuclear hedging, employing strategic ambiguity and diplomatic maneuvering to achieve its goals.

### **What is Nuclear Hedging?**

Nuclear hedging is the policy of being on the brink of acquiring nuclear weapons and delivery systems while not actually doing so. Iran has most likely enacted this policy shortly after 9/11, as the Global War on Terror saw an increase in western military posturing and action across the Middle East and Africa. Nuclear weapons provide a unique security capability as they are difficult to shoot down and provide a massive amount of destructive ability, even with a single use. The addition of nuclear weapons also elevates a nation's military into a distinct group of nations, all regional and global powers, which can afford this capability and responsibility. This in turn elevates the negotiating platforms of any nuclear armed nation by exacting better bargaining positions and concessions whether nuclear weapons are discussed or not. Most of the world's nations were deeply concerned about the acquisition of nuclear weapons by India,

Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea but were forced to accept that these nations would become permanent holders of nuclear weapons despite objections. Iran no doubt understands this as well. Iran also sees what happened to Ghaddafi in Libya and Saddam in Iraq, both of whom gave up nuclear ambitions only to be overthrown and killed by western or western backed forces.

However, Iran has not tested a nuclear weapon. As many sources indicted, Iran has been several months away from developing nuclear weapons for years. This lack of progress is most likely intentional, as Iran is in constant negotiations with western nations, not only over its nuclear programs, but over its support for international terrorist groups, its presence in Iraq and Syria, and its terror activities across the world. The Iranian economy is under immense pressure from international sanctions and its citizens are feeling the effects. Unemployment is high, exports are down, and corruption is high. Wars are seemingly never ending, with Iranian military forces and militias in combat in Syria, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip. The Iranian government needs to fix these issues to maintain its grip on power but lack the diplomatic bargaining chips to do so. The ability to quickly acquire nuclear weapons is the best card they have, as nuclear weapons would allow Iran to regain its regional power status, extracting better terms in any negotiation, whether they are about denuclearization or not. Iran can toe this line without drawing itself into war, like Iraq. Iran can also quickly test a nuclear weapon, thwarting off western intervention, like Libya.

### **Strategic Ambiguity**

Iran has a difficult balancing act to adhere too. If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, or even appears to, then it may face in invasion. America, alongside a global coalition, has acted with and without UN approval to remove authoritarian regimes that come close to acquiring nuclear weapons. Saddam in Iraq and Ghaddafi in Libya could not find the balance of

domestic support and international pressure and ended up being violently removed from power. Iran is well aware of this. The former head of Iran's nuclear agency who served as Foreign Minister, Ali-Akbar Salehi, was quoted in an interview in 2024 claiming that "We have [crossed] all the thresholds of nuclear science and technology."<sup>1</sup> While this does not clearly state Iran's nuclear capabilities and ambitions, it is not the firm and transparent denial that a nation with no nuclear aspirations would declare. Ahmad Haqtaab, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards official who ensures the security of nuclear sites, threatened to review its "doctrine and nuclear policies" if its nuclear sites are attacked by Israel<sup>2</sup>. These warning, by prominent government and military officials, are likely carefully constructed messages that Iran could develop nuclear weapons quickly as it has the capabilities to do so. However, Iran also communicated that their current policy is not to develop nuclear weapons as long as their security is not threatened.

The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has gone on record stating that "We do not want nuclear arms" because do so would be contrary to "our religious beliefs."<sup>3</sup> This both reassures domestic audiences of the government of Iran's actions being based on its interpretations of Islam and placates international observers about Iran's intentions. Although this may appear to a messaging tactic commonly used by autocratic regimes, having the head of state take a softer approach on rising tensions while having retired or relatively minor government and military figures taking harder stances, it is important to know that if Iran does

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<sup>1</sup> Newsroom, Iran International. "Iran Signals It Is Closer to Building Nuclear Weapons." *Iran International*, [www.iranintl.com/en/202402123916](http://www.iranintl.com/en/202402123916)

<sup>2</sup> Chiappa, Claudia. "Iran Hints It Could Develop Nuclear Weapons If Israel Attacks." *POLITICO*, POLITICO, 18 Apr. 2024, [www.politico.eu/article/iran-hints-nuclear-weapons-if-israel-attacks/](http://www.politico.eu/article/iran-hints-nuclear-weapons-if-israel-attacks/)

<sup>3</sup> *Khamenei Says the West Could Not Stop Iran from Building Nuclear Arms If It Chose to* | Reuters, [www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/khamenei-says-west-could-not-stop-iran-building-nuclear-arms-if-it-chose-2023-06-11/](http://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/khamenei-says-west-could-not-stop-iran-building-nuclear-arms-if-it-chose-2023-06-11/)

develop nuclear weapons, this could be seen as a bold faced lie propped up by religion, a notion that may not go over well with the Iranian people. This mixed messaging purposefully confuses international relations, evoking responses that Iran could then use to better form its nuclear policy. This is again a concept that attempts to create domestic support through the relaxation of sanctions from the Supreme Leader while threatening to develop nuclear weapons from prominent, but not as important, military officials. This requires careful balancing and wording to ensure Iran is able to walk the thin line between warfare and international standing.

### **Diplomatic Maneuvering**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, more commonly called the JCPOA or the Iran Nuke Deal, was signed in 2015 by numerous world powers to severely limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. This was an attempt at arm control that both satisfied nations worried about Iran developing nuclear weapons and the Iranian government, struggling under domestic pressure from a stagnating economy and high unemployment. Under this deal, Iran would allow inspectors, monitoring cameras, and easy access to its nuclear sites in order to ensure compliance while sanctions were lifted, providing billions of dollars' worth of relief to flood Iran's markets. Iran was initially compliant with early phase inspections and the economic relief revitalized the Iranian economy. However, in 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew from this deal, citing concerns about Iran's support of international terrorism while imposing sanctions once more. This led Iran to cancel inspections, leaving the world in the dark about its nuclear capabilities. Iran also began enriching uranium far above the needed levels for peaceful civilian power. Since there is little reason to do so besides the acquisition of nuclear weapons, concerns among the global powers responsible for the original JCPOA began to likewise rise.

Currently, all parties including Iran, want to return to the JCPOA, however, there is enough disagreement over how to do so to leave the issues unresolved. Iran once again wants the relaxation of sanctions to alleviate domestic disapproval while prominent nations of the world want full inspections to ensure Iran's honesty. Iran has avoided further escalation from its conflict with Israel over the war in the Gaza Strip, which has protected its nuclear facilities from physical attacks, but has negotiations over phases of inspections and sanctions relief have so far satisfied no parties involved. This diplomatic maneuvering may not be as successful as Iran's ambiguous strategy, but there has been no cohesive push for government reform by its citizens that would see the Ayatollah and his supporters removed from power. Until the removal from power threshold has been crossed, either from domestic or international pressure, it is likely that the JCPOA will continue to be negotiated for the foreseeable future. The leaders of Iran are most likely not as concerned with the everyday economic struggles of the average Iranian then they are with the need to rapidly nuclearize to deter Israel or assert Iran dominance over the Middle East and while appreciative of the economic boost from 2015 to 2018, not appreciative enough to sooth worries arising from Israel.

## **Conclusion**

Nuclear hedging is a difficult posture to both achieve and maintain. Nuclear weapons are expensive, and if delivery platforms are not available, almost useless. Iran has invested considerable resources into its civilian nuclear power infrastructure, unusual for a nation with such a high export level of energy. According to the World Nuclear Association, nuclear

power accounts for just one percent of Iranian power generation<sup>4</sup>. The imposed sanctions seem to be a steep price to pay for such little power. While nuclear power can be expanded by the construction of more nuclear power plants, Iran's enrichment far above the required levels for power generation create worry in the minds of those wary of nuclearization.

While this is a difficult posture to maintain, the lack of democracy ensures a steady ease of policy across decades of ayatollah chosen ruler. Iran sees nuclear hedging as a marathon, not a sprint, and its slow increase of regional power status since the 1980s is proof that even with its domestic and international issues, Iran cannot be stopped from having the ability to quickly acquire nuclear weapons if it so chooses. But as recent events in the Middle East have shown, an explosion of regional violence is possible at any moment and the capabilities of any nation cannot be fully known until it is too late. Iran has not tested a nuclear weapon yet, but if pushed too far, either from within us or from outside, the threshold may be crossed. North Korea has shown that nuclear weapons can be acquired despite the overwhelming disapproval of the international community and once acquired, are there to stay. Nuclear hedging is not the easiest policy to maintain, but the balance between quickly acquiring nuclear weapons to increase negotiating positions while warding off military intervention has been enacted for decades and may continue for as long as the Iranian government sees fit.

If Iran does decide to one day test a nuclear weapon, there may not be advanced warning. Iran is also expanding its drone and missile arsenals, providing an adequate delivery

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<sup>4</sup> "Nuclear Power in Iran." *World Nuclear Association*, [www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/iran#:~:text=Generation%20mix%3A%20natural%20gas%20295.0.8%20TWh%3B%20solar%200.6%20TWh](http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/iran#:~:text=Generation%20mix%3A%20natural%20gas%20295.0.8%20TWh%3B%20solar%200.6%20TWh)



platform. If this happens, then the ensuing war will make sanctions appear miniscule in comparison. Conventionally, Iran does not stand a chance against an Israeli-American led alliance, but if Iran develops nuclear weapons quickly and secretly, then like with North Korea, may be able to emerge conflict free as a stronger power than it was before, exert domestic and international influence far above its non-nuclear status.

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