

Iran and nuclear weapons: Protracted conflict and proliferation. By Saira Khan. London and New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 156. ISBN: 978-0-415-45307-3 (Hardcover).

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Saira Khan in *Iran and Nuclear Weapons: Protracted Conflict and Proliferation* makes the following as pertinent questions: Why does Iran hanker after nuclear power? What factors propel the Islamic Republic to spurn the entire world and remain committed to joining the nuclear club? How can the threats posed by nuclear proliferation in the Gulf be de-escalated?

While dealing with the above-mentioned questions, Saira Khan divides her work into three parts. Part One explores the causes of proliferation, the trajectory of Iran's nuclear quest and the role of the Islamic Republic's successive leaders. Part Two provides the theoretical underpinning and explicates the proliferation proclivities of protracted conflict states. Part Three, sub-divided into four chapters, is a case study of Iran. It examines Iran's nuclear ambition and protracted conflicts between 1947 and 1979; Iran's nuclear programme and engagement in triple protracted conflicts from 1979 onwards; the effects of the Iran-United States asymmetric protracted conflict from 1990 to 2000 on the Iranian nuclear ambition; and Iran's accelerated nuclear proliferation and hostile US policy since 2000. There are introductory and concluding chapters on the strands of arguments in the book.

Iran's march on the nuclear path began in 1957 under Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah exploited his closeness to the US and the U.K. to sign a Nuclear Cooperation Agreement as part of an Atom for Peace Programme. Germany, France and the US playing Cold War politics, assisted Iran to build "a comprehensive nuclear program" although "with the understanding that Iran will never have the ambition to acquire nuclear weapons" (p. 48). In 1967, five megawatts light-water research reactors were commissioned at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (TNRC). Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified the instrument in 1970. Up till 1975,

the Shah reiterated that Iran harbours “no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons but if small states began building them, then Iran might have to reconsider its policy” (p. 55), although the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran’s (AEOI) budget burgeoned from US\$30.8 million in 1975 to over US\$1 billion in 1976 under the Shah.

Successive leaders of Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Khameini, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, showed varying degrees of commitment ranging from outright rebuttal to avowed interests in the nuclear agenda. In 1979, Khomeini decreed nuclear weapons as un-Islamic. Expectedly, the pace of the nuclear programme slowed down under Khomeini when about 3,700 out of the AEOI nuclear scientists left the country. Under Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Iran’s nuclear programme resumed aggressively. The humiliating and sad end of the protracted war with Iraq and the asymmetric conflict with the US together radicalized the Islamic Republic’s leadership and forced a rejuvenation of the nuclear programme assisted by North Korea, China and Russia. The country acquired No-Dong and the Shehab series of intercontinental ballistic missiles (the longest has a range of 1,940 km) capable of hitting all the Gulf states, Iraq and Israel, effectively. Pakistani nuclear scientist, A. Q. Khan, also visited Iran. Rafsanjani referred to chemical weapons as “poor man’s deterrents.”

Khatami was also committed to the nuclear agenda alongside his “Dialogue among Civilizations” rhetoric. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head, Mohammed El Baradei, “confirmed the presence of a large-scale gas-centrifuge enrichment facility, Natanz, and a heavy water production site, Arak” (p. 13). Ahmedinejad also accelerated Iran’s quest for nuclear power. In his first week in office, Iran restarted uranium conversion in Isfahan with sustained progress. Khan posits that Ahmedinejad officially crossed the nuclear threshold having inherited an advanced nuclear programme from his predecessors.

The theoretical section in Part Two of the book argues that nuclear bombs, being the ultimate weapons of deterrence, are coveted by the following states: Protracted Conflicts (PCs) states engaged in territorial conflicts with higher probabilities of war, states in dyadic conflict engagements and PCs entangled with a global power. It is also sought

by states having conflict rivals that possess nuclear weapons/capability and states involved in asymmetric conflicts in the case of Iran against the US. Also, the number of conflict involvements, the regional or global status of the opponent and whether a state's conflict rivals are allies also determine the penchant by states to seek nuclear power (p. 11). The author argues that all the above conditions were satisfied by Iran.

The author's theoretical framework depicts the connection between protracted conflict (independent variable); security, prestige and bargaining leverage (intervening variable); and nuclear proliferation (dependent variable). The author asserts that the Iranian nuclear conundrum fits perfectly into this framework (p. 42). Iran needs security, national prestige and bargaining leverage in a non-asymmetric relationship with the US and these elusive intervening variables condition the country's behaviour to seek nuclear bombs. The protracted war with Iraq (1980-1988) over Shatt-al-Arab waterway and parts of Kurdistan also exacerbated hostilities between them. The proxy war fought with Israel through Hezbollah sharpened Iran's resolve to acquire nuclear weapons. When Iraq invaded Iran, occupying 30,000 square kilometres of its territory, the UN did not condemn Iraq. Iraq attacked the Bushehr nuclear plant built with the help of Germany (p. 56) twice, in mid-1986 and 1987. Thus, Iran had no option but to fight a defensive war for eight years (p. 55). The author says Iraq was supported financially by Saudi Arabia and other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Soviet Union, China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the US also shipped massive weapons to aid Iraq, which used chemical weapons on civilian population in Iran while the U.N. looked the other side (p. 54).

As the author illustrates in chapter five, Iran's engagement with the US from 1990 to 2000, more than any other factor, strengthened the Islamic Republic's determination to acquire the ultimate deterrent. The epithets of a rogue state and "axis of evil" used by the US elites and the media to refer to Iran evoked an irrevocable resolve to seek the nuclear umbrella. Besides this, the US discriminatory and unilateral policies that treated its regional rival, Israel, with kid gloves regarding nuclear powers also sharpened the Iranian resolve. Reading Khan's book suggests that Iran has been unjustly treated over the years by the international community, especially the US.

Iran boasted in 2010 that it had begun to enrich uranium to a 20 per cent fissile purity, thus inching near the 90 per cent required to produce a nuclear warhead. The disclosure is significant as only 3.5 per cent is required to power nuclear power plants. In February 2012, the Islamic Republic claimed it had developed “fourth generation” centrifuges capable of refining uranium thrice as fast as what existed in the enrichment technology. The country is able to stockpile enriched uranium for electricity and nuclear explosions. Media reports suggest that Iran’s main nuclear facility at Natanz currently stockpiles 9,000 centrifuges, indicating an increase of 1,000 over the 8,000 installed capacity uncovered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in November 2011, out of which 6,200 were said to be operational. Also, the country’s scientists have successfully purged the nuclear facility of the virus “Stuxnet” allegedly planted in it by Israeli operators. Given these breakthroughs, Iran has rebuffed international pressures and sanctions led by the US to relinquish its nuclear research programmes, which it consistently claimed was intended to produce electricity and other civilian uses.

Khan’s constructivist leaning manifests throughout the book although it was subsumed under military power politics upon which the book hinges. In the “theoretical implications” section (pp. 116-117), the author asserts that enemy-friend perceptions in inter-state relations “depend on friendship and knowledge.” The book evokes the dilemma of a peace researcher: war is anathematized. But avoiding war in a realist world is a great challenge. In her own words: “States coexist in the anarchic international system, ensure their survival, and perceive that military capabilities can help them secure from external attack. Power is a means to an end; the end being security. Nuclear weapons are especially valuable in this context” (p. 27).

The author is also very optimistic that Iran could renounce and relinquish its nuclear weapons programme “if the US provides security” (p. 118). It remains to be seen how foreign policy re-think by the US towards Iran, bilateral recognition, trust, confidence building and sustained end to diplomatic posturing, which bludgeons other civilizations would assuage Iran. Overall, the book is a veritable addition to readings on proliferation and protracted conflicts. It is a must read for students of security studies and international relations.
