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'I'm afraid I can't allow you in. This is a members-only club' The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Windows of Opportunity in Global Politics

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This brief article discusses the Iranian nuclear program and why it poses such a significant challenge to the international system. In the following pages, I am going to say one thing mainly: the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons is so contentious not only because of its local and regional implications but because it strikes at the heart of the post-war balance of global political power.

On 22 June 2025 the US bombed Iranian nuclear facilities in a concerted effort with the Israeli government. This military operation was justified as a legitimate attempt to hinder the development of Tehran's nuclear weapons program. Iran ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970. Since then, like all other non-nuclear weapon signatories, it has retained the right to develop nuclear resources for peaceful purposes, but not to manufacture atomic nukes. Under the treaty, this right remains reserved for the five recognized nuclear-weapon states --the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China—who disposed of a nuclear military capacity before the ratification of the NPT.

For its part, Tehran accused the US and Israel of launching unprovoked attacks, citing the absence of evidence of any nuclear weapons' production, as confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The same IAEA's report also highlighted Tehran's lack of full transparency regarding some of its nuclear sites and materials.[1] Tehran further accused the broader international community of complicity and double standards in enforcing international

law, arguing that it has allowed Israel to maintain its nuclear arsenal unchecked, without exerting pressure on it to join the NPT.

But what is the matter with Iran? How is it so threatening to Western and European countries? Why should we fear Tehran's nuclear *more* than other nuclear powers? Or, better, where does this fear come from? These questions are rarely asked in the West today, as their answers are considered self-evident.

In recent times we came to know Tehran as one of the three heads of the Cerberus-like threat, alongside Iraq and North Korea, which President George W. Bush famously labelled the 'Axis of Evil' in 2002.[2] On top of that, Tehran's authoritarianism and restrictions on individual freedoms as well as the open sponsorship to groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, or the Houthis all contribute to create a ghastly image in the public culture and opinions. Based on these elements, it seems obvious why we do not even question the tolerance of an Iranian nuclear weapon: it is a rogue state, and it would be too dangerous with nuclear nukes.

Yet, Iran is far from a pariah state. Neither repressive internal governance nor support for organizations designated as terrorist is uniquely Iranian. Also, substantial numbers of Iranian students continue to pursue graduate studies in Europe, and ordinary commercial and economic exchanges persist. Empirically speaking, it is therefore difficult to view Iran as the sole threat responsible for the widespread havoc portrayed in media and public discourse. We could argue it is one among many other, but this is not enough to understand the level of concerns that the Iranian nuclear program specifically raises.

To answer this riddle, we must place the entire debate on 'nuclear Iran' within a historical perspective, which is the purpose of this article. In the following pages, I will first provide a brief overview of the history of Tehran's nuclear program. I will then examine how the current system of nuclear-weapon states came into existence, what it reveals about the Iranian issue, and why Iran has never managed to fit into it.

Nuclear Iran: a Brief History

Tracing a history of the Iranian nuclear program is hard. The difficulties in sources' collection hinder our effort to add details.[3] Despite the difficulties in data gathering, we can argue that, like for much else in the Iranian history of the 20th century, the story of the Tehran's nuclear program has a pre and a post-revolution moment. Against popular wisdom, Iran's early steps in the nuclear world rooted in cooperation rather than opposition to the West because of Cold War strategies and regional geopolitics.

Until 1979, the Shah government was the linchpin of US strategy in the area and the development of nuclear energy program was one of the fields where the Iranian-Western cooperation unfolded. Under the aegis of the US Atom for Peace Program -an initiative sponsored by US President Dwight Eisenhower to promote peaceful nuclear uses- Tehran received extensive technological, economic, and political support to develop in-house nuclear resources for energy-related initiatives. In the 1960s and 1970s, the construction of power plants and research units as well as the provision of materials and technical training were guaranteed by a network of political channels and commercial deals.[4]

For instance, the West-German firm Kraftwerk helped to create the Bushehr Power Plant in the 1970s. Negotiations with the French Framatome guaranteed another expansion of Iranian nuclear assets soon after.[5] The Shah government's prompt signature of the NPT in 1968 in which Iran legally accepted to become a non-nuclear weapons state evidenced the early Iran-West synergy.

The tide turned the other way as soon as the Iranian Revolution gained momentum. The deposition of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 and the following hostage crisis, turned Tehran into the great enemy of US politics in the area. Iran became a strategic conundrum in the region.[6] Its nuclear capability became a Trojan horse in the US-Iran dialogue as it opened to the perspective of a hostile government capable of mobilizing a nuclear arsenal in the middle of one of Cold War regional hotspots.

To be true, Islamic governments never retired from the NPT.[7] Yet, since the second half/late 1980s, the Ayatollah's regime took concrete measures to develop an internal and independent nuclear program without formal communications to the larger international community. The slightly retarded timeline of Iranian atomic efforts is no accident. The deterioration of political and diplomatic ties with the West significantly reduced access to technological resources and exchanges. Also, the war with Iraq (1980-1988) syphoned endogenous economic means and constrained further local private and public investments. On top of that, the conflict led to a massive outflow of migrants, who sought better living conditions abroad or fled political persecution. The subsequent brain drains of scientists retarded the engagement with atomic projects.

These setbacks led Tehran to turn its gaze elsewhere and thus to tap into an unregulated, semi- clandestine network of nuclear technologies and materials that had been expanding since the early 1980s. The so-called A.Q. Khan network, led by the Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, consisted of a cover deep web of suppliers and intermediaries that transferred nuclear technology and know- how to several states --Lybia and North Korea, for instance.[8]

During the 1990s, Western nations grew concern of secret enrichment and reactor plans and put under increasing scrutiny Tehran. In August 2002, the Iranian opposition group National Council of Resistance of Iran publicly revealed the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak. This disclosure prompted the IAEA to investigate, leading Iran to publicly acknowledge its nuclear program.

However, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq under the pretext of Baghdad's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, Iran formally paused its atomic plans, possibly fearing the fate of Saddam Hussein's government next door. A hard diplomatic standoff began, and simmering mistrust has plagued political dialogue ever since. While Iran declared its willingness to cooperate with international authorities --allowing the IAEA greater access and repeatedly asserting its intention to develop nuclear facilities solely for energy purposes-- it also flinched from abiding with all international regulatory procedures promptly. On the other hand, the international community led by the U.S. and Israel always kept scepticism even in front of Tehran's good practices.

This mistrust often intensified during the elections of more hardline presidential candidates, in both the US and Iran. On that occasions, political rhetoric weaponized the nuclear issue and cast doubt on each other's intentions.

This deadlock continued until the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Strongly backed by then-U.S. President Barack Obama in collaboration with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani, the agreement aimed to enhance international oversight of Iran's nuclear facilities, secure a commitment from Tehran to forgo the development of weapons-grade nuclear material, and provide relief from economic sanctions. The treaty also established verification mechanisms through regular communication with and inspections by the IAEA.[9]

The final chapter in this ongoing and complex story unfolded during the 'Trump era.' A long- time opponent of the deal, President Donald Trump swiftly withdrew the United States from the JCPOA. This withdrawal triggered a chain reaction: the easing of economic sanctions was reversed, Iran resumed nuclear activities that had agreed to abandon, and renewed tensions emerged with Western powers and regional rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The U.S.-backed assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 dealt a final blow to the JCPOA. While the Biden administration attempted to revive negotiations for a new deal, talks ultimately stalled and have since reached an impasse.

To sum, the US/Israeli bombing to Iranian facilities this past June can be read as yet another step in this far longer tense history. From the U.S. perspective, it responded to the Trump administration's need to claim a 'major' foreign policy success and present itself as the one that succeeded where many others had failed: resolving the age-old problem of the Iranian nuclear program.

From the Israeli side, the military campaign against Tehran is surely a tassel in a broader strategy to get rid of long-time regional enemies. Since the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic positioned itself as a natural enemy of Tel Aviv and articulated this posture in multiple ways. Support for local Islamist groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen, alongside various forms of political, economic, and diplomatic pressure, have long been central features of Iranian foreign policies. This hostility has alternated between phases of radicalization and normalization, largely depending on the political will of successive governments. Furthermore, the protracted period of economic sanctions on Tehran raises serious doubts about Iran's credibility as an existential threat to Israel, even though its regional proxies -particularly Hezbollah- remain capable of inflicting significant damage on Israeli targets and interests. At the same time, if not in material terms, the narrative of Iran as a structural menace continues to carry potent weight in Israeli electoral politics. In this sense, Israeli attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities should be seen as in continuation of its broader regional strategy alongside its gruesome offensive in the Gaza stripes, the series of missile attacks in Syria, and the decapitation of Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon.[10]

However, this is not enough to understand the widespread resistance to the Iranian nuclear program. This is most evident in the tacit or explicit endorsement of the US–Israeli campaign by European commentators and politicians, who has fewer local or regional interests. For instance, the former Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, argued that 'Iran is *the* problem' in the area.[11] The German Chancellor Friedrich Merz commented that 'this is the dirty work Israel is doing for all of us' for 'we are also victims of this regime [that] has brought death and destruction to the world.'[12] Kaja Kallas, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, joined the chorus tweeting that 'Iran must not be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, as it would be a threat to international security' before urging to return to the table of negotiations.[13]

The history of post-revolutionary nuclear Iran certainly explains, at least in part, the acrimony directed toward Tehran. The methods through which it developed its nuclear program were illegal -- although, legally speaking, the same could be said about the bombing of June 2025-- and the opacity surrounding the details of its nuclear facilities has further heightened international alarm. Nevertheless, there are other nuclear-armed states outside the NPT legislation that do not receive the same political treatment. Thus, what does make Iran 'special'?

The Nuclear Club: a Quivering Edifice

'Today, the United States stockpile of atomic weapons … increases daily, exceeds by many times the total equivalent of the total of all bombs and all shells that came from every plane and every gun in every theatre of war in all the years of the Second World War.'[14] It was December 1953. US President Dwight Eisenhower spoke calm and with clear voice in front of the delegates of the UN general assembly's plenary session. He was describing the fast-accelerating race for nuclear weapons and remarked that the US was winning it. However, the intent of that speech was also launching the Atom for Peace Initiative.

This was the political climate that led to the creation of the NPT, which came into full effect almost two decades later. The treaty allowed states to pursue non-military nuclear programs while formally prohibiting the development of new nuclear weapons. It established clear criteria to distinguish civilian from military uses, with the IAEA tasked with monitoring compliance.

On the one hand, this regulation followed a straightforward logic: as the number of nuclear- armed states increased, the risk of nuclear conflict would have also risen, thereby reducing overall security. On the other, nuclear technologies were inherently dual-use and had valuable non-military applications that should not have been curtailed. The NPT was conceived to regiment this complex duality, limiting military applications while enabling the pursuit of peaceful nuclear endeavours.[15]

Nevertheless, the NPT also had a second political effect: it effectively enabled the then nuclear-armed states --the US, Russia, UK, France, and China-- to 'lock the doors of their nuclear club.'[16] Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, possessing nuclear military capabilities has permitted states to expand their spheres of influence, as non-nuclear states necessarily have to seek protection under the 'nuclear umbrella' of one power or another. The NPT is therefore not just a non-proliferation tool but also an instrument of global politics, granting nuclear-armed states near-unlimited power over non-nuclear weapons states. This power imbalance helps explain why Iran's atomic arsenal raises significant concern among existing nuclear powers, though the degree of apprehension varies between them: it would reduce their uniqueness and global political weight.

This political logic becomes clear when we revisit the history of existing nuclear arsenals and how they related to the NPT. The original U.S.–Soviet atomic duopoly of the early Cold War was short-lived.[17] Other countries managed

to develop their own bombs between the 1950s and the 1970s. Each of them, however, benefited from propitious 'windows of opportunity.'

The United Kingdom played a key role in the Manhattan Project until 1946, when the U.S. Congress imposed restrictions on access to its nuclear program. Undeterred, London swiftly resumed its own research and successfully developed a nuclear bomb by 1952.[18] A few years later, France followed along. Determined to bring the country out from the shadow of the Fourth Republic and back to its past *grandeur*, the newly elected President De Gaulle made the creation of a national nuclear arsenal a priority. The first successful detonation dated 1960.[19]

China became the fifth nuclear weapon state in 1964. In origins, it benefitted from active support from the part of Moscow who saw in Beijing a strategic ally for keeping the Communist bloc in Asia strong. Vice versa, Beijing was convinced of the need of an alliance with Moscow to counteract American policies in the region, particularly after the Korean War. In the early 1960s, this alliance began shrinking because of emerging politico-ideological and strategic ruptures but China continued its program without the auspices of the Soviet Union.[20]

The UK, France, and China succeeded largely because they exploited favourable conditions. The UK benefitted from its 'special relationship' with the U.S. who also saw France as an ally in the Western bloc, in spite of its nuclear autonomy. China, likewise, leveraged its position within the Communist bloc before the split with Moscow. Remarkably, the NPT was signed only after these states had successfully built their atomic weaponries. Although the treaty had a noble intent, its political outcome was the consolidation of an exclusive club that still wields extraordinary leverage over non-nuclear states.

The window of opportunity theory is further supported when we examine those occasions on which the non-proliferation regime failed. There are three other states who officialised their nuclear arsenal and did not join the 'big five' --India, Pakistan, and North Korea. To this three, we need to add Israel who never confirmed but it is widely believed to have its own nuclear military program. Once again, each case resulted for propitious alignment of interests with the nuclear club or benefitted from expectable long-term alignment of interests with them. Leaving aside North Korea for which we do not have enough information and Israel, to which I will return in the conclusion, let us turn to India and Pakistan.

The spark of the nuclear race in the Indian subcontinent came from the development of the Chinese nuclear program. Scared by the military superiority Beijing could unleash and after India lost to China over a brief Himalayan border war in 1962, Delhi put substantial efforts and resources in nuclear research. The first atomic weapon tested in 1974.[21]

As much as Delhi feared the Chinese arsenal, Pakistan feared the Indian one. In a chain reaction, Islamabad rushed to develop its own nuclear capabilities.[22] Once again, Pakistan's atomic ambitions were tolerated because the outbreak of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979 turned Islamabad into a strategic ally of the US. Washington's weapons and resources necessarily crossed Pakistani territory to reach Afghanistan, fuelling the local resistance against the USSR. In the end, India and Pakistan could complete their plans because collectively the 'nuclear club' did not hold significantly enough strategic interests in the region or did not have enough political resources to intervene and halt them.

Ultimately, from a legal and also moral perspective, the non-proliferation framework is motivated by legitimate concerns for humanity's safety. Politically, however, it also preserves a global balance of power by restricting access to what is, effectively, an instrument of international political leverage. As once summarized by the then Indian Foreign Minister in 2007: 'If India did not sign the NPT, it is not because of its lack of commitment for non-proliferation, but because we consider NPT as a flawed treaty and it did not recognise the need for universal, non-discriminatory verification and treatment.'[23]

These words underscore the fragility of the non-proliferation architecture. It endures only as long as states outside the nuclear club accept their exclusion, yet it inherently fosters a perception of unfairness and injustice among those very states. There were rare opportunities to sneak into the club but only when propitious conditions allowed so. And here is the bulk of the question with Iran: presumably it will never have such a window of opportunity.

Iran: the Great Danger

There are three reasons for which Iran has always struggled to create or benefit from favourable circumstances. The first one is its geostrategic location. Stretching right in the heart of the Middle East, the territory ruled by Tehran is rich in oil and it also is the gatekeeper of the Strait of Hormuz, a central node in international trade. Moreover, Iran is at the centre of a regional network of violent groups, which in turn influence other geopolitical hotspots. There are simply too many global interests passing through this area to permit Tehran to develop its own nuclear military power.

Beside *realpolitik*, the second cause is the widespread Islamophobic attitude that developed around the Iranian revolution and Tehran. Since then, the latter came to embody not just a geopolitical but also cultural archenemy of Western interests in the region. It epitomised a long-existing Islamic scare. Islamophobia --the racialization and

discrimination of Muslims based on their Islamic faith-- is a fairly new concept but its roots are entrenched in European common historical memory.[24] Since the Middle Ages --and even more so throughout the long duration of the Ottoman Empire-- the fear of Islamic polities has influenced European society and politics in both overt and subtle ways. The timeline of the reaction to the Iranian revolution backs this argument further. The Shah was overthrown by a coalition of heterogeneous groups, ranging from leftist factions to Islamic figures. Yet, it was only in the early to mid-1980s that dissenting voices from the West grew louder, coinciding with the Islamic component of the revolution tightening its grip. This criticism often opportunistically linked the authoritarian turn of Ayatollah Khomeini's government to its increasingly evident Islamic character.

The Islamic scare found even more solid anchoring in 1989. The infamous Khomeni's fatwa calling to murder the British-Indian author Salman Rushdie and the subsequent so-called Rushdie Affair further convinced good chunks of Western societies of the existence of a real and concrete Iranian danger.[25] The common sentiment was that Tehran was already dangerous enough as it was, let alone with a nuclear bomb.

The third motivation, instead, has more to do with the chronology of the Iranian nuclear program. During the late 1990s and early 2000s the perception of 'the nuclear' underwent a consisted re-evaluation in the public eyes, especially in the case of nuclear weaponries. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between global dynamics and those more specific to the West.

On a global scale, the 1990s marked the rise of mass sociopolitical movements and an increasingly vocal civil society. Growing environmental consciousness brought renewed attention to issues such as ecology, pollution, and renewable energy. While the debate on nuclear armament had previously been confined to high-level politics, expert circles, and specialized lobbying groups, the 1990s saw a sharp popularization of the topic. Environmental concerns interlaced with an ever- growing sensibility on human rights and pacifism and dissent against nuclear weapons overall swelled.

Additionally, attention to the issue was sustained by several international anti-nuclear arms legislations passed in the 1990s. Following the discovery of Iraq's clandestine nuclear program in the early 1990s, the IAEA launched the so-called Programme 93+2, which culminated in the Model Additional Protocol of 1997, aimed at overhauling the IAEA's safeguard measures. Although not all NPT signatories agreed to or ratified this instrument, it is nevertheless a reflection of the sustained public and diplomatic attention that nuclear issues attracted during the 1990s.

Instead, in the West, the urgency of rigid regulations on nuclear proliferation also overlapped with security reasons. Policymakers, security experts, and public opinion were haunted by the nightmare of terrorist groups

acquiring nuclear capabilities.[26] The collapse of the Soviet Union left many wondering about the potentially unregulated accessibility to the Soviet atomic arsenal. The rumours on clandestine black market of nuclear assets began percolating and fuelled the fear of an unbridled production of weapons. The 1995 chemical attack in Tokyo by the Aum Shinrikyo cult reinforced the perception that terrorist organizations might one day obtain weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear ones.[27]

Pop culture well encapsulated this mood. For instance, the Hollywood movie *The Peacemaker* (1997), starring George Clooney and Nicole Kidman, was just one among numerous examples of the sensibility of the global audience on the subject. The film follows the fictional story of two U.S. security officials who race to stop a former Yugoslav soldier from detonating a backpack-sized nuclear bomb in New York City as an act of revenge against Western powers for their role in the Balkan conflicts. In the end, Tehran's nuclear ambitions received far more attention than before for they coincided with a moment of increased interests for non-proliferation not just in policy-makers but also in civil societies.

Conclusions

The world of nuclear weaponry is like an exclusive club. To access, you need to be allowed in, or you must have managed to slip inside, perhaps taking advantage of a brief lapse at the door or aided by a nod of sympathy from one of the regular invitees. Drawing from the world of metaphor, Iran is the guest who tries to set a foot in unsuccessfully and is pushed back at the main entrance with strong words: 'I'm afraid I can't allow you in. This is a members-only club.'

In a sense, this can also be a reassuring perspective: the emergence of another nuclear weapon state would destabilize the already fragile balance of global politics and undermine international security, especially in the Middle East. An Iranian atomic nuke would almost certainly trigger a regional arms race, involving Saudi Arabia and possibly Egypt and Turkey.

On the other hand, the debate over Iran's nuclear aspirations continues to expose the inherent limitations of the NPT. In particular, the treaty's discriminatory stance toward non-nuclear weapon states remains a deep source of grievance in global political relations. This is especially evident among states of the Global South, which often interpret the NPT as another manifestation of the capitalist power structures used by the Global North to maintain dominance. However, this debate has been revitalized in Europe as well. Russia's aggression against Ukraine,

combined with the absence of a European nuclear deterrent to counter Moscow, has undermined the EU's strategic posture from the outset. It also ensured the US to retain the 'trump' card in hand in the negotiation over NATO expenditures.

Yet, the idea of an EU nuclear arsenal is so unrealistic that it never entered serious discussions. A go-it-alone approach to national nuclear armament would be an even worse option. It would set off an arms race akin to that predicted for the Middle East, ultimately reducing overall security.

The optimal objective remains the pursuit of comprehensive global nuclear disarmament. However, such a goal seems distant, if not utopian. In the Middle East, a reasonable starting point would be to apply sustained pressure on Israel to comply with international regulations, sign the NPT, and be open about its nuclear arsenal. More broadly, the only (albeit weak) path forward lies in the pressure exerted by civil society and lobbying groups advocating for real nuclear disarmament. It is not much, but it is a start.

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