



Iranian foreign policy and the nuclear deal¹

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The present paper argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran as a state format is a modernization experiment, which bears all the formative identity elements of Iranianness, Shiite Islam and modernity in the European sense. Being an experiment usually includes the aim of spreading and defending the experimental model, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception. In its foreign policy and its relations to the larger world in general and to its region in particular, its one and only aim is to ensure the survival of the system. In doing so, besides propagating its "universal" ideology (Islamic Republic and not Shiite Islamic Republic), it looks for allies, fights wars by proxy – i. e. tends to behave as an empire. The Iranian nuclear program and the international controversy over it are derivatives both of the experiment and the empire: while there is no great or regional power without modern technology, the intrinsic dual-use character of most technologies – nuclear ones included – project a kind of threat to the outside world, which in the case of nuclear power has thus far only been possessed by the great powers.

Roots of the IRI's foreign policy identity: Iranianness, Shiite Islam and modernity

Iran is one of the most ancient states in the Middle East, with a statehood and civilization reaching back to well before the time of Christ.² The Iranian peoples settled on the Iranian plateau in the second millennium B.C., and the first Persian empire – that of the Achaimenid dynasty in the fifth century B.C. – was a well-organized state with three hierarchical structures (religious, military and administrative) ruled by the *Shahinshah*, the King of Kings. The territory of Achaimenid Persia reached well beyond the present national borders of the Islamic Republic, spanning from ancient Greece in the west to the Indus river in the east.

The memory of ancient Persian/Iranian glory has been maintained over the millennia by symbols such as the ancient holidays that are rooted in their own particular dualistic religion, especially the *nourouz* (Iranian New Year, March 21st), and traditions such as the *zurkhaneh*. But while there remain some followers of the ancient faith to this day, and their religious practice and presence is common knowledge, nevertheless – given that Zoroastrianism gave way

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² In spite of the fact that Iranian statehood has been interrupted several times throughout history, the sense of being a state with a long past has prevailed.

to Islam – it was much more the Persian language which ensured a continuous link to the glorious past. The stories of the *Shahname* – the Book of the Kings written in thousands of pairs of verses in pure Persian in the (then) Arabic-speaking court of the ruler of Khorasan – played an important role in maintaining Persian identity. In spite of the fact that after the Achaemenid and Sasanid dynasties no Persian dynasty ruled the Iranian plateau until the Pahlavis in the twentieth century,³ the Iranian and Persian character has lived on, keeping alive its heritage and its awareness of the ancient empire. In the twentieth century it was the Pahlavis who came to strengthen this "national" character, by relying on such symbols as the choice of name for their dynasty, by changing the name of the country from Persia to Iran, and even by attempting to introduce Pan-Iranism.

The Iranian Plateau was gradually Islamized between the seventh and tenth centuries. However, it was the transition to Shiite Islam, officially in 1501, which gave the specific religious character to the present Iranian identity. (The fact that Iran has been the only country to maintain Shiite Islam as its official religion throughout centuries up to this day, has contributed to the sense of Iranian exceptionalism.) On the one hand, Shiite Islam had elements which in a way echoed features of the ancient Iranian religion (the special esteem of the King or Imam, the hierarchical religious structure, the solemn celebrations and commemorations). On the other hand, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 cemented the coupling of the Iranian and the Shiite, especially in the eyes of the neighboring Arab countries, in spite of the fact that there are huge Shiite communities in those countries as well. Although by exporting the Islamic Revolution – and by calling it Islamic instead of Shiite Islamic – Ayatollah Khomeini aimed at attracting the whole of the Muslim *umma*, the *velayat-e faqih* (the model of Islamic government elaborated by him) is based on the Shiite notion that the believer needs the guidance of a learned and infallible religious authority, who can interpret the divine laws for him in the context of everyday circumstances. Other distinct characteristics of Shiite Islam – the sense of victimization embodied in the yearly commemoration of Hussein's martyrdom (called *Ashura*), and the religious-legal possibility of hiding one's own conviction (the *tekiye*) – can be detected in Iranian foreign policy and diplomatic style.

"European" institutions, such as the constitution and the parliament (*mejlis*), first appeared in Persia at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the course of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 (the decree on the constitution and the creation of the first elected *mejlis*) to 1911 (when under foreign pressure the *mejlis* was dissolved). Although the Islamic Revolution swept away the Shah, and especially the forced modernization programs conducted under his rule, these basic Western institutions were not only maintained, but were amended by the "republic." The new model – that of an Islamic Republic based on Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of Islamic government – relied both on the Shiite concept of the believer's need for an learned, infallible scholar (*faqih*) to interpret divine laws, and on the mass public support – demonstrated through direct elections – that provides the legitimate basis not only of any democracy, but also of Shiite Islam. The new model (called the *velayat-e faqih*) was, therefore, an experiment in the coupling of Shiite Islam with the modern European political entity, but in many ways it was – or seemed so from the outside – also very much Iranian.

³ After the fall of the Sasanids to the Arab-Islamic caliphate, the ruling dynasties were first of Arab and later of Turkish origin.

The velayat-e faqih – the Iranian Islamic (Shiite) revolutionary experiment

The Islamic Republic of Iran was built upon Islamic government theory and was accepted by a majority vote for the new constitution in 1979. While the term "Islamic Republic" was not unprecedented (Pakistan is an Islamic Republic as well) – and, according to al-Mawardi's definition of the caliphate, "sovereignty belongs to God, and his commands, as revealed in the Quran and complemented by the sunnah (traditions) are the major bases of Islamic law"⁴ – the *velayat-e faqih* as elaborated by Ayatollah Khomeini and established in Iran was (and has remained) uniquely Shiite and Iranian in nature, both in its self-perception and in the perception of the world at large. These factors, together with the revolutionary character of the Islamic Republic⁵ – though this latter resonated throughout the Islamic world – clearly defined the limits of Iranian political influence, as was seen in the course of the so-called Arab Spring.⁶

The two principles – divine sovereignty, and the sovereignty of the people (which underlies the republican model) – were integrated, and the result was a complex system in which the Shiite clergy was dominant, but which, however, included elements controlled by the people. This dual character – reflected in the constitution as well – in a way reflected another experimental model, that of the former socialist "people's republics," in the sense that while formally the elements of the classical republican model were there (with the three separate branches of power, elections, and so forth), real power rested with the state ideological power – be it the representatives of communism, socialism, or Shiite Islam.

In the resulting Islamic Republic of Iran, therefore, it is the *faqih*, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution – representing and interpreting God's will – who stands at the center of the political decision-making. In his person and position, religion (elevated to the rank of state ideology) and state are integrated. He is the one supervising the formally separated legislative, executive, and judicial powers. Although the constitution defines his political functions (determining the main direction of policy and controlling its execution, authorizing the president, leading the armed forces, and appointing the six members of the Council of Guardians, the Supreme Judiciary, and the head of State Radio and Television), the Supreme Leader also embodies the Islamic Republic, supervises religious foundations, and in his theoretical work provides guidance.

This Supreme Leader, however, is elected and appointed by the Assembly of Experts, which also has the right – given certain conditions – to dismiss him.⁷ The original task of the Assembly of Experts was to elaborate the draft constitution in 1979, after which it was dissolved. The second Assembly of Experts was elected by direct vote in 1982, and charged with the task of designating the next Supreme Leader, which they did in 1989 when Ayatollah Khomeini died.

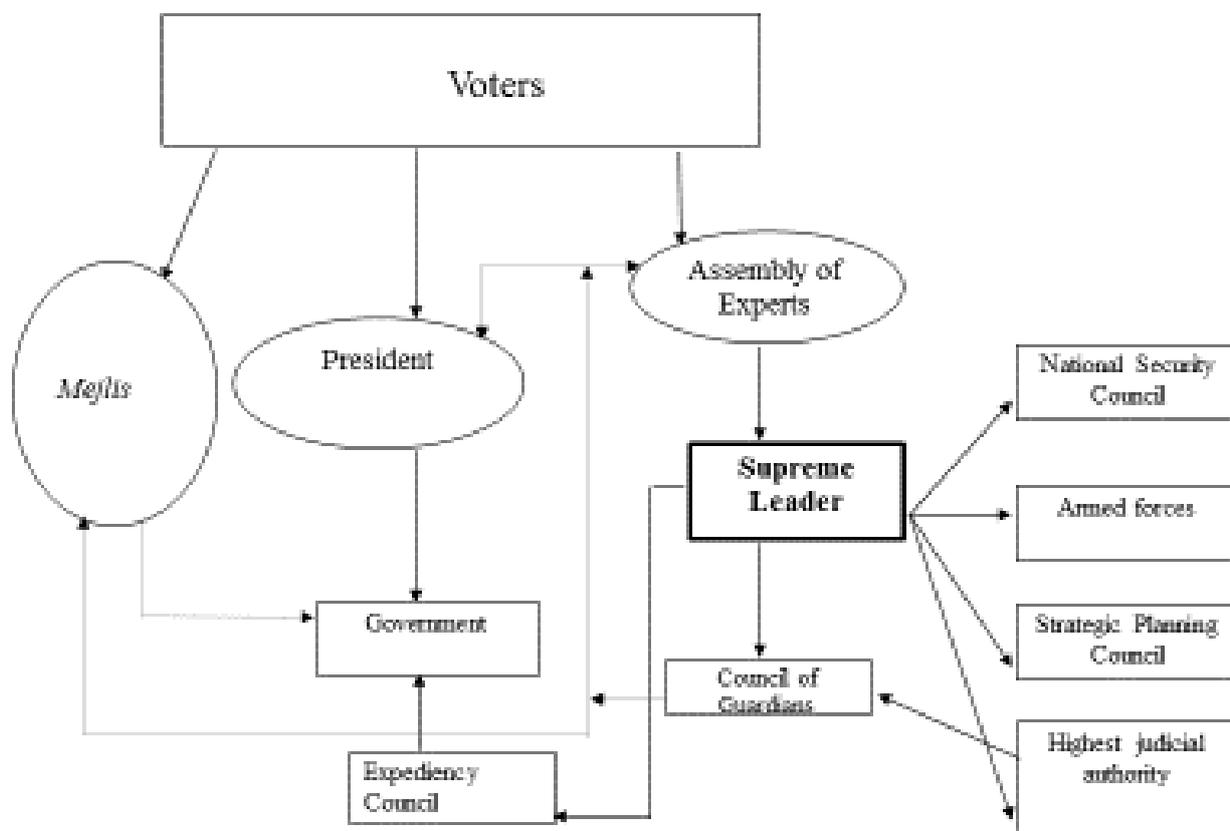
⁴ J. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford encyclopedia of the modern Islamic world*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 314.

⁵ The Islamic Revolution, and Ayatollah Khomeini's declared program of its export, raised concerns regionally. The terminology (*fitna*, *ridda*, *thaura*, *inqilab*, etc) has negative connotations in the Islamic discourse, as they "signify impious attempts to overthrow the order established by believers." J. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, op. cit., p. 434. "Revolution" has come to be associated with Shiite Islam in spite of the fact that the traditional Shiite clergy are characterized much more by quietism than activism. Most ayatollahs in their life and teaching are withdrawn from politics, Ayatollah Khomeini being much more the exception than the rule. Still, it could be claimed that Shiite Islam includes both elements – quietism and activism – as symbolized by the two sons of Ali, Hasan (quietism) and Hussein (activism).

⁶ In spite of the claims of Ayatollah Khamenei, the "Iranian model" (of the *velayat-e faqih*) had no chance of attracting the transiting Arab states for several reasons, including its Shiite and Iranian character.

⁷ "Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution." Available online: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/iro0000_.html (accessed on August 12, 2015).

Figure 1. State structure and decision-making in the IRI



The sovereignty of people is exhibited in the directly elected parliament (*mejlis*), President, and above mentioned Assembly of Experts. The *mejlis* is the main legislative body of the Islamic Republic, elected every four years. It has 290 members, and – since the constitution acknowledges religious minorities – Zoroastrians and Jews are entitled to one representative each, the Assyrian and Chaldean Christians to one (combined), and the more numerous Armenians to two. All legislation, however, is supervised by the Council of Guardians, who also have the task of pre-screening every candidate standing for elections. (The Council of Guardians is a 12-member body, half of its members appointed by the Supreme Leader, half by the Supreme Judiciary. Their task is to preserve and maintain the Islamic character of the state.)

The executive power is exercised by the President, who since 2013 is Hasan Rouhani. The President is elected for four years, for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The President appoints the ministers, but the *mejlis* must approve them. He signs the laws approved by the *mejlis* and the Council of Guardians, and international agreements. Therefore, the President acts in many ways as a Prime Minister would, since due to a constitutional amendment the Islamic Republic has no Prime Minister.

The Head of the Judiciary is appointed by the Supreme Leader. He is responsible for the “establishment of structure necessary for justice commensurate with that mentioned under Article 156, the drafting of judiciary bills appropriate for the Islamic Republic, and for the employment of just and worthy judges, their dismissal, appointment, transfer, assignment

to particular duties, promotions, and the carrying out of similar administrative duties, in accordance with the law.⁸

The Islamic Republic has a specific organ, the Expediency Council, which in cases of dispute mediates between the *mejlis* and the Council of Guardians. While this function is usually not very visible, the Expediency Council is a very powerful body within the structure of the Islamic Republic, especially given that they have received authorization to advise the Supreme Leader.

The Islamic Republic of Iran – a regional power and an empire?

The Islamic Republic of Iran and its antecedents, Persia and Iran, look back on a thousand years of statehood and regional power, even if its tradition of independent statehood has been interrupted several times in the course of history. In modern times it fought against Tsarist Russian and British influence, while during (most of) the Cold War it belonged to the US alliance in the neighborhood of the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War international system its place and role were marked out by such historic events as the Islamic revolution and hostility towards the United States, the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988), and the US policy of dual containment, which contributed to keeping its capabilities and resources tied down domestically, while at the same time limiting its room for maneuvering. The end of the Cold War, and especially the changes following September 11, 2001, however, have led to an expansion of the Iran's range of movement: the Taliban were toppled in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, both of which had not only been hostile to Iran, but had served as a counterbalance to Iranian regional influence. With their coming to an end, Iranian ambitions have grown and have quickly turned Iran into a regional power with hegemonic aims.

Iran has long been in possession of most of the capabilities needed to achieve the status of regional power: a strategic position (between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, overlooking the Strait of Hormuz); a population of some 75 million, a sizeable territory, natural resources (including the second biggest gas and the fourth biggest oil reserves globally), a strong national identity (as explained above), etc. While Shiite Islam as a religion and ideology is a useful tool for promoting Iranian interests in the context of the transformed regional relations, yet at the same time – with Shiites constituting only some 10–15 per cent of the Muslim *umma* as a whole, and by and large regarded by the Sunni majority as heretics – it places limits on Iran's room for maneuver. Not to mention the fact that the *velayat-e faqih* state model has limited ideational and mimetic attraction at best – even among other Shiite communities. The same can be said of the attraction of "Iranianness." In spite of the fact that there are numerous peoples of Iranian origin (and language) living in the region (the Kurd, the Tajik, the Beluj, the Pashtun, the Lur, etc), it has not been much used for political purposes – apart from the weak try by Reza Shah in the 1930s to invoke some pan-Iranian feeling (mentioned above). (The reasons for this may be manifold, but two of them must be taken into account: the Islamic Republic's emphasis on the country's religious as opposed to its national character, and the fact that many of these minorities are living within Iran itself and posing a challenge to the Islamic Republic.)

⁸ "Article 158 of the Iranian constitution." Available online: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/iro0000_.html (accessed on August 12, 2015).

Although it is widely held (referring to a statement by the Jordanian King Abdallah⁹) that Iran has been creating a Shiite crescent of allies (Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, and even Hamas) in building up its regional power status, a closer look at these Iranian allies reveals that the term *jabhat al-muqawama* or Resistance Front is much more to the point. Not only because some of these allies are secular (the Assad regime) or even Sunni (Hamas), but also because – as their “matching” vocabulary shows – their alliance is mostly based on their common fight against the “imperialist” endeavors of the United States or Israel.¹⁰

Nevertheless, in the post-Cold War, post-Gulf War, and post-2003 Iraqi War reshaping of the Middle East, the regional Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia has come to dominate the agenda and the discourse. Though the struggle for power between the two has been described as a Sunni–Shia sectarian clash, it has many other aspects to it as well. Undeniably, the ideological–religious element plays an important role in the propaganda, but also at play is Saudi conservatism vs Iranian revolutionarism, and Arab vs Persian/Iranian. However, all these characteristics hide the fact that what we are witnessing is a competition between two “nation-states” behaving like empires. There are limits to the power and influence of both, although both are vying for the expansion of these limits. And they have different means and tools for realizing their aims: Saudi Arabia has money, with which it is able to finance such aims as exercising political and economic influence elsewhere in the Arab world (e. g. in Egypt). Iran has modern technologies in its own right – such as those of the nuclear fuel cycle, the manufacture of uranium centrifuges and satellites, etc. While Iran was under sanctions, this delicate balance of power resulted in a practically unchallenged Saudi dominance on the Arab Peninsula, and an Iranian advantage in Iraq. And although in Syria they are in opposite camps, both have tried to avoid open confrontation, even if the Saudi rulers often spoke against Iran,¹¹ and even coordinated with Israel. Yet both Saudi Arabia and Iran regard the Islamic State as an enemy. It is as yet too early to say how the Iranian nuclear deal will change this delicate set of balances, but in some way or other it will be a game-changer.

The Iranian nuclear controversy and the deal

The Iranian nuclear program has played a decisive role in determining Iran's place in the post-Cold War international system: it made the UN Security Council pass four resolutions sanctioning Iran,¹² exposing the country to scrutiny in a way that is alien to the usual Iranian style of foreign relations. But the sanctions also forced Iran into an unprecedented self-reliance, at least in technological terms, which has further boosted its regional power status. At the same time, it has drawn attention yet again to the deficiencies in the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, in more ways than one. It has become clear that states not usually regarded as among the technically most developed ones are able to master the nuclear fuel

⁹ See e.g. K. Barzegar, “Iran and the Shiite crescent. Myths and realities,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. XV, issue 1, Fall/Winter 2008, pp. 87–99. Available online: <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/BRZ.BJWA.2008.pdf> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis see e.g. E. N. Rózsa, “Iran and Saudi Arabia – a regional ‘Cold War’ with global relevance,” in P. Bátor, Róbert Ondrejcsák, eds, *Panorama of global security environment 2014*, Bratislava: Center for European and North Atlantic Affairs (CENAA), 2015, pp. 279–88.

¹¹ “to cut off the head of the snake,” in “Saudi Arabia urges US attack on Iran to stop nuclear program,” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cables-saudis-iran> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

¹² “UN Security Council Resolutions,” No. 1737 (December 23, 2006), 1747 (March 24, 2007), 1803 (March 3, 2008), 1929 (June 9, 2010)

cycle; that if there were no international nuclear fuel bank,¹³ there would be nothing within the Non-Proliferation Treaty itself that could legally prevent a state from producing such fuel; that nuclear weapon states still possess their destructive capabilities; that there is still no international treaty forbidding the use of nuclear weapons, or addressing the humanitarian catastrophes that would result from such use;¹⁴ and that forty years after the proposal of a Middle Eastern nuclear weapon-free zone¹⁵ – and after the decision at the 2010 NPT review conference to hold a conference in 2012 on this issue – a MENWFZ or MEWMDFZ has yet to be held, and what's more has been postponed indefinitely; etc.

For Iran's technical development or "modernity" is not just a formative element of its identity, but also a necessary tool of its regional power and prestige. The development of civilian nuclear technologies¹⁶ is the inalienable right of the Islamic Republic guaranteed under Article 4 of the NPT, and as such a symbol of independence and national dignity. When Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* in 2005 prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons in the Islamic Republic,¹⁷ he established the official policy which Iran and its representatives subsequently cited. Although many – led by the United States and its allies – questioned the validity of this *fatwa* and claimed that it could be conveniently withdrawn or a counter-*fatwa* issued, practically speaking the regime's philosophy excludes this option. Besides, US, Israeli and other intelligence agencies have agreed that since 2003 there has been no sign that Iran is actively considering a military nuclear program.¹⁸

Paradoxically, in a neighborhood where apart from Pakistan and Iraq no other state has a nuclear program, even a civilian program provides prestige. (This is slowly changing, though, with the Gulf Arab states¹⁹ and Turkey²⁰ starting their own nuclear programs –

¹³ There have been decades-long negotiations on the establishment of a multinational nuclear fuel bank, from where states could get/buy nuclear fuel without any political conditions, but so far with no result. See e. g. "Multinational fuel bank proposal reaches key milestone," IAEA, March 6, 2009. Available online: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/multinational-fuel-bank-proposal-reaches-key-milestone> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

¹⁴ This in spite of the fact that the Humanitarian Initiative was launched following the 2010 NPT review conference and has evolved into an increasingly accepted, but also much debated, new dimension of the NPT.

¹⁵ The establishment of a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East was first proposed in 1974 by Iran and Egypt. In 1990 Egyptian President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak proposed making it a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction.

¹⁶ Most of these technologies are dual-use, which means that they can be used both for civilian and military purposes.

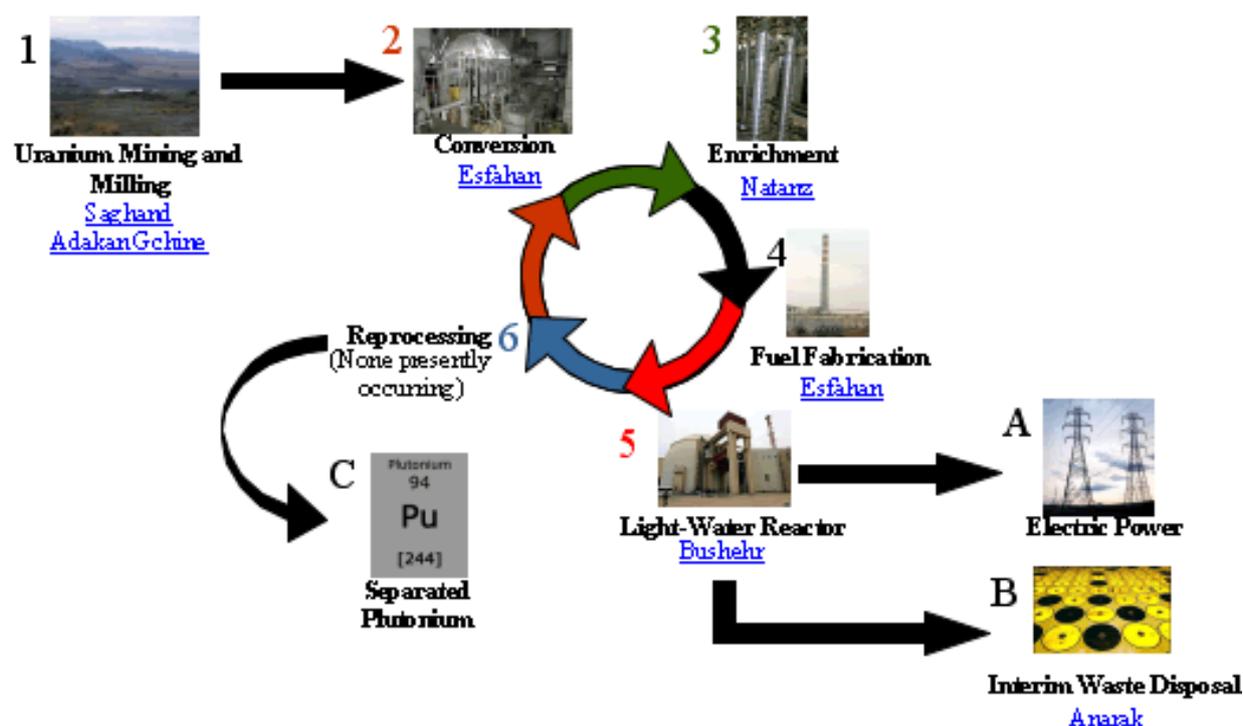
¹⁷ See e. g. M. Eisenstadt, M. Khalaji, "Nuclear Fatwa. Religion and politics in Iran's non-proliferation strategy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus*, No.115, September 2011. Available online: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus115.pdf> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

¹⁸ See e. g. S. M. Walt, "Why America will never hit reset with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2015. Available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/03/why-america-will-never-hit-reset-with-iran-mark-dubovitz-containment/> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

¹⁹ In 2006, following a call by Arab League chairman Amr Moussa to start civilian nuclear programs to balance Israel's military capability, several Arab states announced the launch of a nuclear program, among them Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. While the ambitious UAE program of building 14 power plants in all in the coming decades is well under way – construction of the first unit (Baraka 1) started in July 2012, and the second (Baraka 2) in May 2013; the first unit is more than 60 per cent complete and is expected on line in 2017 – in Saudi Arabia, which has ambitions to build 16 nuclear power plants in the coming decades, the construction has not yet started. Available online: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-O-S/Saudi-Arabia/>, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-O-S/Saudi-Arabia/> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

²⁰ The construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant (Akkuyu) is planned to start in 2015, with two others to follow soon. Source: "Nuclear power in Turkey," World Nuclear Association, August 2015. Available online: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-T-Z/Turkey/> (accessed on August 12, 2015).

Figure 2. Iran's Nuclear Power Fuel Cycle



Source: <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/sites/power-fuel-cycle/> (accessed on August 12, 2015)

however, with Iran having the full nuclear fuel cycle, which the others will not,²¹ this still gives Iran a meaningful competitive advantage.)

The locations of the Iranian nuclear fuel cycle's main elements are well-known, most of them having come under the continuous inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency: the uranium mines in the center of the country, uranium conversion in Isfahan, uranium enrichment in Natanz and Qom, the nuclear power plant in Bushehr on the Gulf, and the Tehran Training Reactor, as well as the heavy water plant and construction site of the plutonium fueled Arak research reactor. Yet a number of the minor elements supporting the program – not necessarily themselves nuclear – are well spread throughout the country.

Conclusion

The nuclear deal announced on July 14, 2015, as put forward by President Barack Obama, will cut both ways (uranium and plutonium) for Iran, should it wish to develop nuclear weapons. Still, the nuclear deal from Iran's perspective is a success, in spite of the limitations imposed

²¹ The nuclear energy "newcomers" will receive (buy) the nuclear power plant only, and will not produce their own fuel. This they will buy as needed, and will probably ship the spent fuel back for reprocessing. Thus will not have (or be allowed to have) the full nuclear fuel cycle.

on its nuclear program.²² The deal acknowledges Iran as an equal partner of the world's leading states and its right to a civilian nuclear program, including uranium enrichment. With many of their frozen assets released and the gradual suspension of sanctions, the potential investors rushing into Iran are multiplying day by day. The nuclear fuel cycle capability, though it is only one issue among many in which Iran has interest, will enhance its regional power status and will remain a powerful political tool – to the dismay of many in the region. Thus not only is Iran's position enhanced in the region, but the regime's main goal of survival is assured. And it is from the standpoint of this re-established position within the international community, and in the role of responsible regional power, that Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif has called on the nuclear weapon states and on Israel to disarm their nuclear arsenals.²³

²² "[T]he smiles on the faces of Iranian negotiators and their optimistic statements tell the story of their satisfaction," D. Menashri, "The nuclear accord with Iran: the day after," *ACIS Iran Pulse*, No. 75, July 30, 2015. Available online: <https://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/324-iranpulseno75> (accessed on 12, 2015).

²³ "Iran's foreign minister calls for world's nuclear weapons states to disarm," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-weapons-states-disarm-israel> (accessed on August 12, 2015); "Iran has signed a historic nuclear deal – now it's Israel's turn," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-vienna-treaty-middle-east-wmd> (accessed on August 12, 2015).