Article

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Iran and the Nuclear Threshold: What Prevents It from Becoming a Declared Nuclear Power?

(Translated)

For more than two decades, Iran's nuclear issue has occupied a central place in international politics not merely because it concerns the future of a nuclear program pursued by a strategically located Muslim land, but because it embodies a broader struggle over the balance of power in the Middle East and the very nature of the international order. The issue has long ceased to be simply a matter of centrifuges and uranium enrichment levels; it has instead become a question of independence, deterrence, international legitimacy, and the limits of power in a world where the powerful write the rules and then exempt themselves from them, and where the movement of capital, instead of the principles of justice, shapes the global map.

Iran's nuclear program began during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with direct American support under the "Atoms for Peace" initiative launched in 1953. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the program suffered a temporary setback before gradually resuming during and after the Iran–Iraq War. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the program had become the focal point of a confrontation between Iran and the West, particularly after the disclosure of sensitive nuclear facilities such as the Natanz enrichment plant. Since then, the issue has entered a prolonged cycle of sanctions, negotiations, and escalating mutual pressure.

The confrontation did not remain confined to the diplomatic arena. Over the years, Iran's nuclear program was subjected to a series of sabotage operations and targeted assassinations aimed at prominent scientists. Among the most notable figures associated with this period was Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was killed in 2020 in an operation widely attributed to the Jewish entity and its foreign intelligence agency, Mossad. Several other Iranian nuclear scientists had also been assassinated in earlier operations inside Iran. Regardless of the operational details, the political message was unmistakable: to prevent Iran from moving closer to the nuclear threshold by targeting the expertise and infrastructure upon which its nuclear program depended.

The major turning point came in April 2021, when Iran announced that it had begun enriching uranium to 60 percent in response to the sabotage attack on the Natanz nuclear facility. This was not merely a technical increase in the enrichment level; it was a resounding political declaration that Iran had acquired capabilities it had not previously possessed. From a technical standpoint, enriching uranium to 60 percent represents a highly advanced stage in the nuclear fuel cycle. It places Iran much closer to the enrichment levels associated with fissile material used in nuclear weapons (90 percent) than to the lower enrichment levels traditionally required for civilian nuclear applications.

From that moment onward, a new question arose: if Iran is capable of enriching uranium to this level, why has it not become a de facto nuclear-armed state?

To answer this question, it is first necessary to distinguish between nuclear capability and the actual possession of nuclear weapons. The history of the global nuclear age demonstrates that possessing the necessary knowledge and infrastructure does not necessarily mean making the political decision to build a nuclear weapon. Today, five states are officially recognized under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as nuclear-weapon states: the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom. The nuclear club itself is divided into two categories: two nuclear superpowers (Russia and the United States), followed by the remaining nuclear states, which are far behind.

The international reality, however, is more complex than the legal framework suggests. Several states exist outside this treaty-based system, including India, Pakistan, and North Korea, all of which possess or are widely acknowledged to possess nuclear weapons, as is the Zionist entity.

This is where the paradox frequently raised by Iran and its supporters becomes apparent: if India, Pakistan, and the Jewish entity have all become de facto nuclear-armed states, why is Iran's nuclear ambition regarded as an exceptional threat?

The official answer offered by Western governments is that Iran is a party to the NPT and is therefore bound by legal obligations that do not apply to states which never joined the treaty in the first place. Yet this explanation alone does not fully answer the political question. Many observers argue that the issue is also shaped by alliances and the balance of power. The Jewish entity maintains a close strategic partnership with the United States, while India has become an important American partner in balancing China's rise. Iran, by contrast, is viewed as a revisionist regional power with nuclear ambitions and an extensive network of regional allies and proxies, and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) could become unchecked and transform it into a force opposed to American influence, despite decades of orbiting within America's sphere of influence. From this perspective, attitudes toward nuclear proliferation are understood primarily through the lens of geopolitics and from the perspective of civilizational hostility towards Islam and Muslims, not through the selective interpretation of treaty texts.

Nevertheless, focusing solely on external factors is not enough to understand Iran's stance. The more fundamental question is whether the Iranian leadership itself sees a clear strategic interest in becoming an openly declared nuclear-armed state. Possessing nuclear weapons undoubtedly provides a formidable deterrent, making the prospect of overthrowing the regime by force or launching a full-scale war against it far more difficult. North Korea is frequently cited in this context as an example of a poor and internationally isolated state that nonetheless succeeded in establishing a deterrence equation compelling the world's major powers to deal with it with considerable caution.

On the other hand, openly declaring itself a nuclear-armed state could, in the eyes of many, impose costs even greater than those Iran has borne thus far. It could also trigger a regional nuclear arms race in which countries such as Turkey (which has quietly advanced its own nuclear capabilities while hosting approximately 20 U.S. nuclear warheads at İncirlik Air Base under NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements) would be reluctant to remain within a deterrence framework defined by others. Moreover, Iran itself may at times prefer to remain a "threshold state": a country capable of moving rapidly toward nuclear weapons without formally declaring their possession. Such a position allows it to enjoy some of the strategic benefits of deterrence while avoiding some of the costs associated with an official declaration.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the central dilemma surrounding Iran's nuclear program is no longer primarily a technical one. After decades of investment, technological development, sanctions, and sustained international pressure, the debate has increasingly shifted toward questions of political will and strategic calculation. The real question, therefore, is no longer whether Iran is capable of approaching nuclear weapons capability, but rather whether it possesses the political resolve to cross the threshold separating a nuclear threshold state from an openly declared nuclear-armed state?

In the end, Iran's nuclear issue remains one of the defining geopolitical issues of the twenty-first century, illustrating the complex interplay between law, power, and sovereignty or, more accurately, the predominance of power politics in today's international order. It demonstrates that the international order operates not only through treaties and legal norms, but also through shifting balances of power and strategic interests. It also raises a question that is likely to persist as long as Iran retains its advanced nuclear capabilities: will the current state of latent deterrence endure, or will the region and perhaps the world one day witness the emergence of a new de facto nuclear power? The lesson learned from the Iranian experience is that disengagement from the Western system is possible.

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