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Why should the Visegrad Group support the Iranian Nuclear Deal?

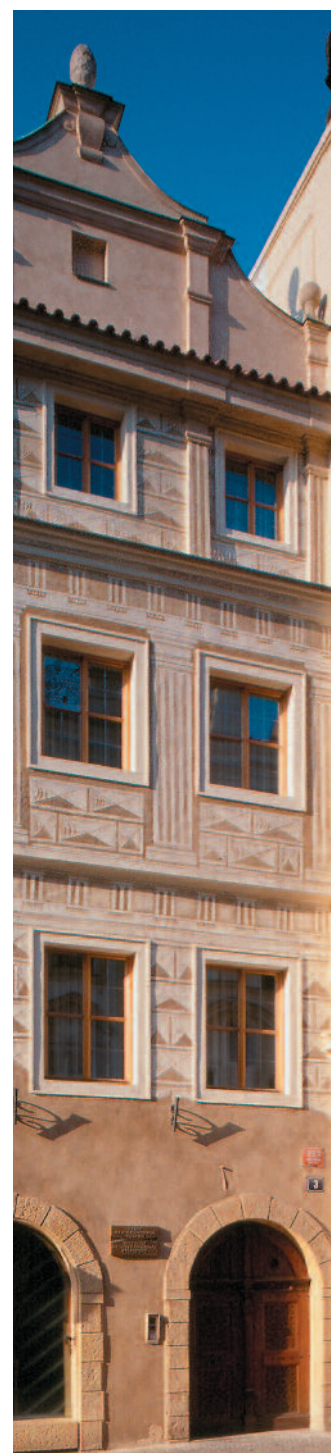
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Meanwhile, in its foreign policy and its relations to the world at large and to its region, the one and only aim is to ensure the survival of the system. In trying to achieve this aim, besides propagating its “universal” ideology (Iran is to be an Islamic Republic, and not a Shiite Islamic Republic) Iran tends to behave as an empire.

The Iranian nuclear program is a derivative of both of these tendencies. The nuclear deal acknowledges Iran’s status and gradually terminates the sanctions against it, but cuts off the ways to an eventual nuclear weapon capability for Iran.

The Visegrad countries should support the Iranian nuclear deal, as they have economic (diversification of energy resources and the opening of a 75 million market to which they so far have limited access) and security interests (migration of people from farther east to Europe as well as nuclear arms control and disarmament) related to the reintegration of Iran into the international system.



Introduction

On July 14, 2015 the so-called P 5 + 1 (the permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) concluded a historic deal with Iran over its nuclear program. The present paper argues that the Iranian nuclear program and the international controversy over it are derivatives of both the experimental model of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its behaviour, in which it acts as an empire.

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. When a country serves as an experiment in terms of its state format, it usually includes the aim of spreading and defending the experiment model, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception to this. In its foreign policy and its relations to the world at large in general and to its region in particular, the one and only aim is to ensure the survival of the system. In trying to achieve this aim, besides propagating its “universal” ideology (Iran aims to be an Islamic Republic, and not a Shiite Islamic

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Republic) Iran is looking for allies and wages wars by proxies – i.e. it tends to behave as an empire.

While there is no great/regional power without (technical) modernity, the innate dual-use character of most modern technologies, the

nuclear ones included, projects a kind of threat to the outside world which so far only the great powers were capable of. By imposing manifold sanctions on Iran, the international community aimed at eliminating the possibility of an eventual Iranian military nuclear program. By the nuclear deal Iran’s right to its civilian nuclear program is acknowledged – but within mutually agreed limits.

The gradual suspension and lifting of the sanctions regime opens the way for Iran’s reintegration into the international system, which raises many security concerns in its neighbourhood.

Roots of the foreign policy identity of the IRI: 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 time periods well before the times of Christ. The Iranian peoples

settled down on the Iranian plateau in the 2nd millennium B.C., and the first Persian empire – that of the Achaemenid dynasty in the 5th century B.C. – was a well-organized state with three hierarchical structures (religious, military and administrative), and it was ruled by the *Shahinshah*, the King of the Kings. The territory of Achaemenid Persia reached well past the present national borders of the Islamic Republic, as it expanded from ancient Greece in the west to the River Indus in the east.

The memories of the ancient Persian/Iranian glory have been maintained through the millennia by symbols such as the ancient holidays rooted in the country's specific dualistic religion, especially the *nourouz* (the Iranian New Year, which falls on March 21st), and traditions such as the *zurkhaneh*. But while some followers of the ancient faith have remained to this day, and their religious practice and presence is common knowledge, as Zoroastrianism gave way 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 a pure Persian in the (then) Arabic-speaking court of the ruler of Khorasan, had an important role in maintaining the Persian identity. In spite of the fact that following the Achaemenid and the Sasanid dynasty no Persian dynasty ruled the Iranian plateau till the 20th century Pahlavis, the Iranian and Persian character has lived through and kept alive the heritage and awareness of an ancient empire. In the 20th century it was the Pahlavis who came to strengthen this “national” character by relying on such symbols as the choice of the name of their dynasty, by changing the name of the country from Persia to Iran, and even by trying to introduce Pan-Iranism.

The Iranian Plateau was gradually Islamized from the 7th to the 10th century. However, it was the transition to Shiite Islam, officially in 1501, which gave the present Iranian identity its specific religious character. (The fact that Iran has been the only country to maintain Shiite Islam as the official religion throughout the centuries to this day added 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/the Imam, the hierarchical religious structure, the solemn celebrations/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 neighbouring Arab countries, in spite of the fact that there are huge Shiite communities there too. Although by the export of the Islamic Revolution – and by calling it Islamic instead of Shiite Islamic – Ayatollah Khomeini aimed at attracting the whole 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. Other distinct characteristics of Shiite Islam – the sense of victimization embodied in the yearly commemoration of Hussein's martyrdom called *Ashura*, and the *tekiye*, the religious-legal possibility of hiding one's own conviction – can be detected in the Iranian foreign policy and diplomatic style.

“European” institutions, such as the constitution and the parliament (*mejlis*), first appeared in Persia in the beginning of the 20th century, in the course of the Constitutional Revolution, which lasted from 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 rule of the Shah and especially the forced modernization programs conducted under it, these modern institutions were not only maintained, but also amended by the Islamic “republic”. The new model, that of the Islamic Republic, which was based on Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of the Islamic government, relied on both the Shiite concept of the believer’s need for a learned, infal-

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ible scholar (*faqih*) to interpret the divine laws among everyday circumstances, and the mass support – manifested through direct elections – which provided the legitimate basis not only of any

democracy in Iran (as any real democracy depends on mass support), but also of Shiite Islam itself, as well as on the “matching” state format of the republic. The new model, called the *velayat-e faqih*, was therefore an experiment in the coupling of Shiite Islam and a modern European political entity, but in many ways it was – or seemed to be from the outside – also very much Iranian.

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

The Islamic Republic of Iran was built upon the Islamic government theory and was accepted by a majority vote during the vote for the new constitution in 1979. While the term “Islamic Republic” has not been unprecedented (Pakistan is an Islamic Republic as well), the *velayat-e faqih* is a unique principle of divine sovereignty and the sovereignty of people in a republican form dominated by the Shiite clergy. As elaborated by Ayatollah Khomeini and established in Iran, it has become and remained uniquely Shiite and Iranian in nature, both in Iran’s self-perception and in the perception of the world at large. These factors, together with the revolutionary characteristic of the Islamic Republic, clearly delineated the limits of the Iranian political influence as it has become manifest in the course of the so-called Arab Spring.

This dual character – which is reflected in the constitution as well – and the propagated export of the revolution 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 such as the separation of power and parliamentary elections were there, real power rested with the state ideological power, be it the representatives of communism, socialism or Shiite Islam.

In the consequent Islamic Republic of Iran it is the *faqih*, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution – representing and interpreting God’s will – who stands in the centre of the political decision-making. In his person and position religion (elevated to the rank of state ideology) and the state are integrated. He supervises the separated legislative, executive and judicial powers. Although the constitution defines his political functions (setting the main directions of the policies and the control of their execution, the authorization of the President, serving as the head of the armed forces, appointing six members of the Council of Guardians and the Head of the Judiciary, and serving as the head of the state radio and television stations) the Supreme Leader also embodies the Islamic Republic, supervises its religious foundations and, by his theoretical work, provides guidance. The Supreme Leader, however, is elected and appointed by the Assembly of Experts, which has the right to dismiss him.¹

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

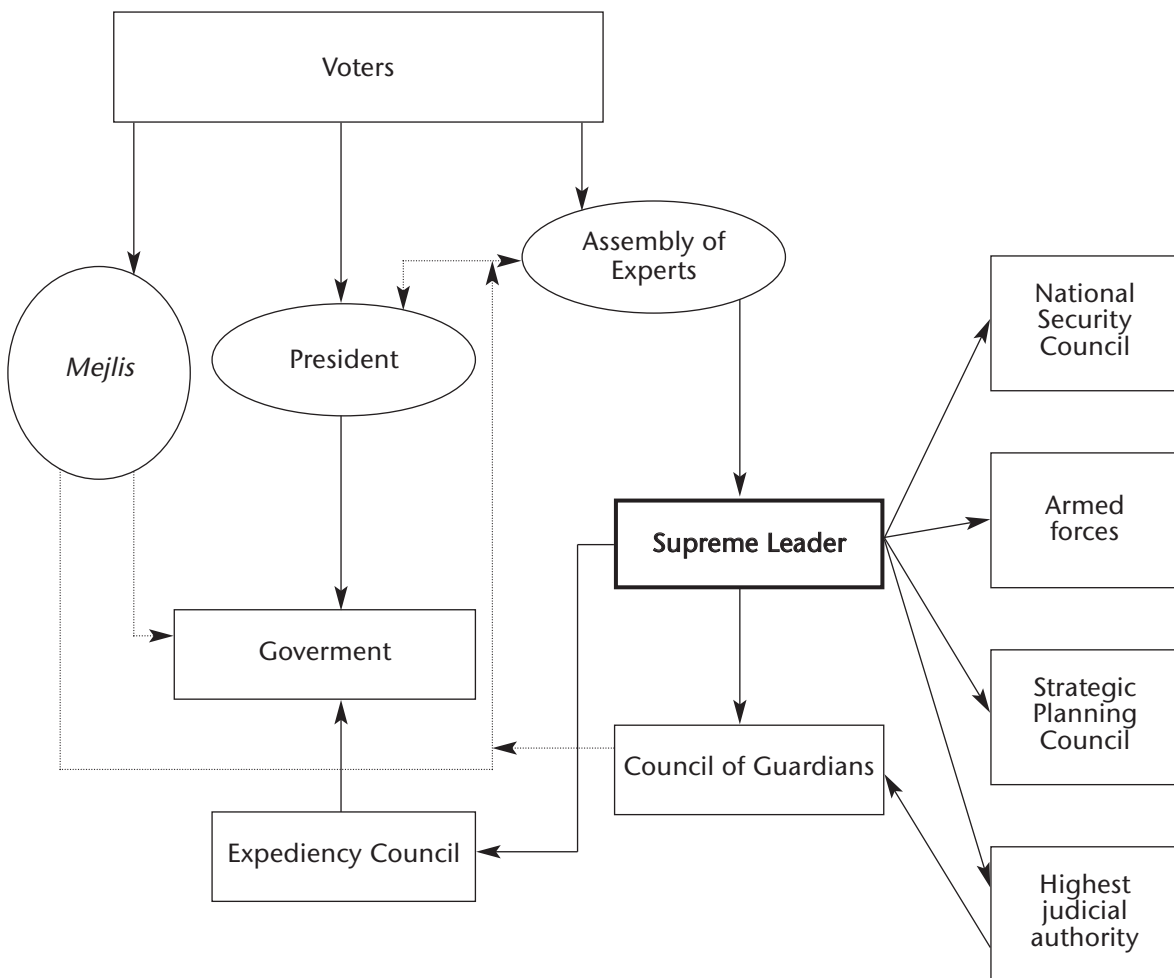
Executive power is practiced by the President, and since 2013 Hasan Rouhani held this position. The President is elected for four years, and he can be in office for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The President appoints the ministers, but the *mejlis* should approve them. He also signs the laws approved 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.

¹ Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution. Online: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html.

The Head of the Judiciary is appointed by the Supreme Leader. He is responsible for the “establishment of [the] structure necessary for the justice commensurate with [and] 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, [and] promotions, and carrying out similar administrative duties, in accordance with the law”.²

The Islamic Republic has a specific organ called the Expediency Council, which, in case of a dispute, has to mediate between the *mejlis* and the Council of Guardians. While this function is usually not very visible, the Expediency Council is a very powerful body in the structure of the Islamic Republic, especially since it received authorization to advise the Supreme Leader.

Fig. 1: State structure and decision-making in the IRI



² Article 158 of the Iranian Constitution. Online: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html

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 thousands of years of statehood and regional power status, even if their tradition of independent statehood has been disrupted several times in the course of history. In modern times such disruptions were provided by the fighting against Czarist Russian and British influences, while during (most of) the Cold War it belonged to the US alliance in the region that worked to contain the Soviet Union's influence there. 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 the hostility to 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 on the one hand, while limiting its room for manoeuvre on the other. The end of the Cold War and especially the changes following September 11th, 2001, however, have led to an expansion of the Iranian space for movement: the Taliban were toppled in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq was deposed as well. Both of these regimes had not only been hostile to Iran, but had served as a counterbalance to the Iranian regional influence. With their cessation, Iranian ambitions have grown and have quickly turned Iran into a regional power with hegemonic desires.

Iran has many assets that could enable it to achieve regional power status (a strategic position between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, overlooking the Strait of Hormuz; a population of some 75 million people; a sizeable territory; natural resources, including the second biggest gas and the fourth biggest oil reserves in global terms; a strong national identity, as explained above, etc.). While Shiite Islam as a religion and an ideology is a useful tool for promoting Iranian interests in the context of transformed regional relations, at the same time, as Shiites constitute only some 10–15% of the Muslim *umma* as a whole and by and large are considered to be heretics by the Sunni majority, the Iranian room for maneuver is limited. Not to mention the fact that the *velayat-e faqih* state model has only a limited ideational and mimetic pull at best – even among other Shiite communities. The same can be said about the attractiveness of “Iranianness”: in spite of the fact that there are several different peoples of Iranian origin (also speaking the language) living in the region (the Kurds, the Tajiks, the Beluj, the Pashtuns, the Lurs, etc), apart from the weak attempt by Reza Shah in the 1930s to provoke some pan-Iranian feeling (as mentioned above), the concept of a shared Iranianness has not been used much for political purposes – neither then nor afterwards. (The reasons may be mani-

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fold, but the Islamic Republic's emphasizing of its religious character against its national character, and the fact that many of these minorities are living within Iran itself and are posing a challenge to the Islamic Republic must be taken into account.)

Although – referring to a statement by the Jordanian King Abdallah³ – it is widely held that Iran has been creating a Shiite crescent of allies (Iraq, Syria, the Hezbollah and even Hamas) in building up its regional power status, a closer look at the Iranian allies reveals that the term *jabhat al-muqawama* or the Front of Resistance is much more to the point. This is so not only because some of these allies are secular (e.g. the Assad regime) or even Sunni (Hamas), but also because as their “matching” vocabulary shows, their alliance is mostly based on their fighting against the “imperialist” endeavours of the United States or Israel.⁴

Nevertheless, in the post-Cold War, post-Gulf War and post-2003 Iraqi War re-shaping of the Middle East, the regional Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia has come to rule the discourse. Though the struggle for power between the two has come to be described as a Sunni-Shia sectarian clash, it has many other aspects to it. Undeniably, the ideological-religious element plays an important role in the related propaganda, but the conflicts of Saudi conservatism vs. Iranian revolutionarism and of Arabs vs. Persians/Iranians are also at play. However, all these characteristics hide the fact that what we are witnessing is the competition of two “nation-states” behaving like empires. Both have limits to their power and influence, although both are vying for an expansion of these limits. And both of them have different means and tools to realize their aims: Saudi Arabia has a large amount of money, with which it is able to finance such political aims as the influencing of political and economic processes and outcomes elsewhere in the Arab world (e.g. Egypt). In turn, Iran has modern technologies – in its own right – such as those of the nuclear fuel cycle, the manufacture of uranium centrifuges or satellites, etc. While Iran was under sanctions, the delicate balance of power resulted in a practically unchallenged Saudi rule on the Arab Peninsula and an Iranian advantage in Iraq. And although in Syria the two countries are in opposite camps, both have tried to avoid open confrontation, even if the Saudi rulers were often speaking against Iran⁵ and even coordinating with Israel. Yet, both Saudi Arabia and Iran consider the Islamic State as an enemy. It is as yet too early to say how the Iranian nuclear deal is going to change the delicate set of balances, but in a way it is going to be a game-changer.

³ Barzegar, Kayhan (2008) “Iran and the Shiite Crescent. Myths and Realities”, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. XV, issue 1, pp. 87–99. Online: <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/BRZ.BJWA.2008.pdf>.

⁴ Rózsa, Erzsébet N. (2015) “Iran and Saudi Arabia – a Regional ‘Cold War’ with Global Relevance”. In Bátor, Peter; Ondrejcsák, Róbert (eds.) *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2014*, Pozsony: Center for European and North Atlantic Affairs (CENAA), pp. 279–288.

⁵ “Saudi Arabia Urges US Attack on Iran to Stop Nuclear Program”, *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cables-saudis-iran>.

The Iranian nuclear program

The Iranian nuclear program – started in the 1950s under the Shah, but with some disruptions that continued after the revolution – has from the beginning been an element of Iran’s modernization, which, especially since the beginning of the nuclear controversy in 2002, has developed into a matter of national pride and independence. However, technical development or “modernity” is not just a formative element of Iranian identity, but also a necessary tool of regional power and prestige. The development of civilian nuclear technologies is an “inalienable right” of the Islamic Republic that is guaranteed under Article 4 of the NPT. When Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* in 2005 prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons in the Islamic Republic,⁶ he set the official policy which Iran and its representatives consequently referred to. Although many countries – led by the United States and its allies – questioned the validity of this *fatwa* and claimed that it could still be conveniently withdrawn or that a counter-*fatwa* could be issued, the regime’s philosophy practically excludes this option. Besides, US, Israeli and other intelligence agencies have agreed that since 2003 there has been no sign that Iran would be considering a military nuclear program.⁷

Paradoxically, in a neighbourhood 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 states⁸ and Turkey⁹ starting their own nuclear programs, but when Iran has the full nuclear fuel cycle, while the other countries will not have it in the near future, this still gives Iran a meaningful comparative advantage.)

Since 2002, when the controversy started, but especially from 2006 onwards, the Iranian nuclear program has evolved rapidly and substantially in spite of the international and unilateral sanctions and also in spite of efforts – attributed mainly to the United States and Israel – to halt it by other means (the STUXNET virus, the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists, etc). By now Iran has mastered and become self-sufficient in practi-

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⁶ Eisenstadt, Michael; Khalaji, Mehdi: “Nuclear Fatwa. Religion and Politics in Iran’s Non-Proliferation Strategy”. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* #115, September 2011. Online: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus115.pdf>.

⁷ Walt, Stephen M.: “Why America Will Never Hit Reset With Iran”, *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2015. Online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/03/why-america-will-never-hit-reset-with-iran-mark-dubovitz-containment/>.

⁸ World Nuclear Association. Online: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-O-S/Saudi-Arabia/>;

⁹ World Nuclear Association. Online: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-T-Z/Turkey/>.

cally all the technologies of the nuclear fuel cycle, which is a capacity very few states are in possession of.

The locations of the Iranian nuclear fuel cycle's main elements are well-known, and most have been under continuous inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency: the uranium mines in the center of the country, the uranium conversion plant in Isfahan, the uranium enrichment plants in Natanz and Qom, the nuclear power plant in Bushehr on the Gulf coast and the Tehran Research Reactor; there is also the heavy water plant and the construction site of the plutonium fueled Arak research reactor. Yet, the minor supportive elements of the program – not necessarily nuclear – are well spread all over the country. So it is not – or not only – the known elements of the program which are in question, but the possible undeclared activities, the previous (even if long closed) experiments with a military dimension, the eventual potential innate military capacity of the dual-use nuclear fuel cycle and the political will.

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Iran, and exposed Iran in a way that was far from the usual Iranian foreign policy style.¹⁰ While the programme made Iran the target of threats of war and war plans, it also acted as a kind of deterrence

measure. But the sanctions also forced Iran to develop an unprecedented self-reliance, at least in technological terms, which has come to further boost its regional power status, especially as it was able to dictate the international agenda. The nuclear deal, from the Iranian point of view, seems to settle some of these issues: while putting technical and physical limits on the nuclear program, politically it is interpreted as an acknowledgement of the Iranian system and of Iran's regional status as a "respected, equal" partner of the world leaders.

But the Iranian nuclear program and the international controversy over it have yet again drawn attention to the deficiencies of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime in more than one way: it has become clear that states usually not considered among the technically most developed ones can master the nuclear fuel cycle; if there is no international nuclear fuel bank, there is nothing within the Non-Proliferation Treaty that would/could legally prevent a state from producing nuclear fuel; the nuclear weapon states still have their capabilities; there is still no international treaty forbidding the use of nuclear weapons or addressing the humanitarian catastrophes eventually caused by such use; and forty years after the proposal of a Middle Eastern nuclear weapon-free

¹⁰ UN Security Council Resolutions Nos. 1737 (December 23, 2006), 1747 (March 24, 2007), 1803 (March 3, 2008), 1929 (June 9, 2010).

zone and the 2010 NPT Review Conference's decision to hold a conference in 2012 on the issue, the MENWFZ or MEWMDFZ has still not been held; and what is more, it has been postponed indefinitely.

Iran, encouraged by its acknowledged status, did not hesitate to step up as the responsible regional power and called on the nuclear weapon states and Israel to disarm their nuclear arsenals.¹¹

Conclusion and recommendations

The nuclear deal announced on July 14, 2015, as US President Barack Obama put it forward, will cut both ways (uranium and plutonium) for Iran should it want to develop nuclear weapons. Still, the nuclear deal is a success from Iran's perspective in spite of the limitations on its nuclear program.¹²

The deal acknowledges Iran as an equal partner of the world's leading states and its right to its civilian nuclear program, including uranium enrichment. With many of the

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frozen assets released and the gradual suspension of the sanctions, the rush of potential investors to Iran is multiplying by the day. The nuclear fuel cycle capability, though it is one issue among many others in which Iran has interests, 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 main aim – regime survival – is ensured. And it is from Iran's re-established position within the international community and its role as a responsible regional power that Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif called on the nuclear weapon states and Israel to disarm their nuclear arsenals.¹³ Among the next logical steps the MENWFZ or MEWMDFZ will probably follow soon.

- The Visegrad countries have no direct interest in the Iranian nuclear deal; however, they have many increasingly important indirect interests in its success. Consequently, they should support the deal and, where possible, help in its realization.

¹¹ "Iran's Foreign Minister Calls for World's Nuclear Weapons States to Disarm", *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-weapons-states-disarm-israel>; "Iran Has Signed a Historic Nuclear Deal – Now It's Israel's Turn", *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-vienna-treaty-middle-east-wmd>.

¹² Menashri, David: "The Nuclear Accord with Iran: The Day After", *ACIS Iran Pulse* No. 75, July 30, 2015. Online: <https://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/324-iranpulseno75>.

¹³ "Iran's Foreign Minister Calls for World's Nuclear Weapons States to Disarm", *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-weapons-states-disarm-israel>; "Iran Has Signed a Historic Nuclear Deal – Now It's Israel's Turn", *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/31/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-vienna-treaty-middle-east-wmd>.

- The re-integration of Iran by gradually lifting the sanctions will prove to be an important option in the diversification of energy resources and will open the 75-million market of Iran for foreign investment and business. Following the global financial crisis, the V4 should not only try to realize possibilities based on the continuously upheld relations with Iran even among sanctions, but they should look for options to coordinate their policies (as is done in the Balkans).
- From the security point of view, a huge share of the migration flow reaching the Visegrad countries is originating from the countries to the east of Iran, and the immigrants travel to them via Iran. The V4 should cooperate with Iran on migration issues, e.g. through information sharing, early notification, etc.
- The Visegrad countries have traditionally supported nuclear arms control and disarmament. Their nuclear expertise in the field of civilian nuclear technologies could be offered and made use of in the technical inspection of the deal. Although partly due to their NATO membership they did not pursue the creation of the Central European nuclear-weapons-free zone, they do and should support the Middle Eastern NWFZ/WMDZF as a measure aimed at curbing one of the biggest security challenges in an increasingly volatile neighbourhood.

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