

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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**IRANIAN CONUNDRUM:
POLITICO-RELIGIOUS
NARRATIVES AND
NUCLEAR CONNECT**



**Lt Gen Rameshwar Yadav, PVSM,
AVSM, VSM (Retd)** for Director
General of Infantry.

There are reports of high decibel speeches and threats by the Iranian polity recently to avenge assassination of General Qasim Suleimani and nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the two national iconic personalities. Both the assassinations have been executed purportedly by US and Israel combined as per Iranian assessment. Indeed, it is a deliberate act to target the top leadership of two Iranian institutions capable of executing existential threat to Israel and US interests. The objective, obviously, is to convey a sinister coercive message of political will of the perpetrators and technology at their command to do such precision strikes, if situation so warrants. With that, Iran and her leadership have been put on warning of severe punitive import.

Iranian justice department has even approached Interpol twice for arrest of President Trump and 47 others for their involvement in murder of General Sulemani. The Iran is reported to have initiated process to increase the enrichment levels of Uranium to 20% as against laid down limit of 3.67% as mandated in the nuclear deal. It would reduce the time window to produce a nuclear weapon which stipulates 90% enriched Uranium fuel. Surely, a

message hinting at possible nuclear brinkmanship is being conveyed by Iran ostensibly for international consumption.

Iran has also apprehended an oil tanker of US ally South Korea demanding release of seven billion dollars dues from them to Iran. The timings of these overtures is important as there is going to be a change of guard in the US and all the stake holders are trying to increase their political leverages in the emerging strategic space. Iran is the most affected party having been pressurized and cornered during Trump administration, hence seems to be proactive to create leverages of coercive import.

Speculations are also rife of possibility of Israel orchestrating a clandestine violent act on US forces in Iraq and blaming Iran for the same, thereby creating a trigger for military action by US against Iran. The President Trump is known for his extreme antipathy towards Iran and such an eventuality cannot be ruled out to provide a space to him to ease out from a political high. If it actually happens, then even the new administration may be compelled to continue to follow hard-line policy restricting scope of rejoining the Iranian nuclear deal.

This hypothesis seems to be stretch of imagination on its face value, whereas there is a pattern of military overtures on slightest of provocation in the region. The West Asia is undergoing a defining time the way political shifts are taking place prompting possibilities of hostilities given the low threshold of political patience. Iran is expected to create vectors to force US to provide political accommodation to Iranian interests with change of guard through display of her nuisance quotient.

There are reports of Iranian intentions to stop access of the IAEA officials to their nuclear facilities in case the economic sanctions are not lifted by 21 February 2021. This, obviously, is to pressurize the incoming administration in the US to take a decision on their Iran policy within one month of their assuming office. **Iran appears to be playing a mind game by orchestrating scenario of catastrophic consequences, thereby forcing US to back off and ease the economic sanctions.**

The Iranian assertive ways have a history mired in the transformation of an economically vibrant nation with pro western leanings into a regional political rebel due to religious afflictions of radical strains. It also have cold war era connect since mid twentieth century ever since the region became central to geo politics of oil and gas and its rivalry quotient at regional as well as at global levels. **There are historical, social, cultural and economic and leadership linkages overshadowed by religious overreach which have shaped the Iranian political conduct in the recent past.**

Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran was a pioneer seen to be transforming his nation into a modern and progressive society on western pattern. The all powerful clergy was seen to be pushed to periphery from their centre stage in the social milieu ostensibly due to perceived cultural intrusion by the non believers. This move was construed as an act of blasphemy by the deeply religious society with medieval mindset. **The intent of the Shah to modernize the nation with the patronage of US lead to confrontation between the state and the clergy.**

In consequence, strong clergy in Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini orchestrated uprising against the Shah. **It was termed as Islamic revolution clearly reflecting its political connotations and leadership intent beyond Iranian geographical space.** The perceptions were created to touch the emotive religious nerves of the community propelling them to rise and save their socio-religious value systems and structures. And, it worked in case of Iran and created substantial ripples elsewhere in West Asia with similar societal undercurrents. The shah was overthrown in February 1979 by this popular uprising and he was forced to go into exile.

The Islamic revolution had its genesis in quest for leadership space in West Asia by ambitious Iranian clergy lead by Ayatollah Khomeini. The rason' d etre' happened to be Palestinian cause, a pan Islamic issue with its emotive religious calling beyond sectarian rivalry. Israel became the common enemy who had uprooted the Palestinian brothers from their habitat of generations. Therefore, **the idea of total annihilation of Jewish intruders from Palestine became the lead pan Islamic sentiment.** Such

a cognitive emotion manifested into three Arab- Israeli wars wherein the entire Islamic fraternity was seen to be on same page cutting across their sectarian differentials.

Israel with better technology and military leadership was able to defeat and capture substantial territories of her Arab neighbours. The Egypt and Jordan of Sunni dispensations chose to shake hands with Israel facilitated through US mediation. Whereas, Syria and Lebanon backed by Iran continued to be on warpath to evict Israel from the occupied territories on Golan Height. Iran also provided all the support to the Palestinian rebels in their campaign to avenge their humiliation and take back their ancestral lands. Whereas, most of the Islamic nations were seen to be going slow to pursue Islamic cause other than occasional political posturing.

It created a leadership space for Iran as she stood out with her demonstrated belligerence and political intransigence against Israel. The sectarian divide took upward turn to take it to next level here after with Saudis leading the Sunni and Iran as the leader of Shiite dispensations. As a result, US, Israel and Saudi Arab combined were perceived to be the enemies of Iran, the protagonist of Islamic cause and Shiite interests.

Iran, accordingly, started creating fresh alliances and upgrading military and economic structures to counter these common identified enemies. Iran shifted her dependence for military structures from US to Russia and started synergizing Shiite fraternity in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon creating a Shiite crescent. In Iranian political lexicon, **the viable way of total annihilation of Israel was possible by acquiring nuclear weapon capabilities.** At the same time, it would also serve the purpose of assuring political ascendancy over her regional sectarian rivals.

The Iranian nuclear program was initiated during Shah's regime with the help of US. Iran is a signatory of NPT and maintains that her nuclear programme all through its development has been for the peaceful purposes. Whereas, her track record has been perceived to be dubious with conflicting reports on her actual intentions. It is believed that Iran has technology, structures and adequate quantities of fuel to go critical to produce a weapon device. The lack of transparency and suspicious conduct in nuclear domain

by Iran has led to imposition of economic sanctions by UN as well as US in order to check her nuclear ambitions.

Pakistan had also developed nuclear capability by late 80s and carried out first test in May 1998. Pakistan called it a 'Islamic bomb' signifying its religious connect. Whereas, the Pakistani nuclear doctrine talked of its India specific employment as an instrument of her national security. Moreover, Pakistan being a Sunni predominant nation was seen to be loyal to Saudi lead Sunni dispensation. **Therefore, the concept of Islamic bomb was more of symbiotic expression of Pakistan aspiring to be a champion of Islamic world and not serious about its use other than her anti India obsession.** Therefore, it was incumbent on Iran to develop her own weapon grade nuclear capability.

Iran, all through this time, is known to be pro active in initiating military overtures against her opponents at slightest of provocation. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen have been Iranian fronts to launch missile and drone attacks on Israel, US establishments and economic assets of Saudi Arab. Iran has also developed a network of non state actors across her Shiite allies to engage their opponents in grey zone conflicts. There is perceptible inclusiveness of sub conventional, conventional and nuclear elements in Iranian military doctrine making it a matter of deep regional security concern.

In that, **the Iranian nuclear dimension in particular was assessed to be an international concern especially looking at the low conflict threshold and absence of structures to control it.** Accordingly, concepts of engaging Iran instead of pushing her against the wall emerged in order to check her nuclear calculus. The big powers came together and engaged Iran through the mechanism of 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action' (JCPOA) also known as Iranian nuclear deal. The economic sanctions over period of time had impacted Iranian economy severely which paved way making Iran to relent and sign the nuclear deal brokered by President Obama in 2015.

Iran agreed to open up her nuclear facilities to be inspected and monitored under international watch. However, Iran continued her missile develop plan

which was not in the ambit of the nuclear deal. It was not of liking by the new US administration under President Trump. Moreover, there were apprehensions that Iran has not declared all her nuclear assets which defeated the purpose of the deal. As a consequence, despite Iran following the laid down norms of the deal in right earnest, US chose to pull out from the deal in May 2018 asking for total and irreversible roll back of her nuclear programme. The US objective was to defang Iranian nuclear ambitions, thereby reducing her capabilities to indulge in coercive military overtures against her allies.

Besides above, the economic sanctions were also escalated to next level which included punitive action even on the nations trading with Iran. This apart, the Israel with connivance of US declared her sovereignty over the occupied territories in Golan Heights in March 2019. There were also plans of annexation of Jew occupied areas of the West Bank and few other areas of interests. It appears to be designed to empower Israel and compel the Palestinians to accept the US sponsored package deal for independence under certain conditions of subservience to Israel. It prompted an exchange of missile and air attacks between Iran and Israel further vitiating the security situation.

All above was done in the backdrop of US plans to reduce her military presence in the region which would impact on security **assurance** of Israel and the Saudi Arab inc. As a result, the deeply embedded religious intransigence of Sunni nations is seem to be giving way to reconciliation with Israel pushing the core Palestinian cause on the periphery. The prompt seems to be aggressive US diplomatic campaign to make their allies aware of their plans to reshape their regional strategy and its politico-security connotations concerning them.

UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have established diplomatic relations with Israel, joining Egypt and Jordon who had shaken hands much earlier. There are unconfirmed reports of even Saudi Arab is moving in this direction and likely to patch up with Israel soon. Once it happens, then it is expected that other nations of Sunni group would also join the bandwagon. **This new**

shift in political turf has potential to change the entire dynamics of West Asian strategic landscape in times to come.

This is one diplomatic initiative which possibly would not be diluted by the new administration in the US for its intrinsic strategic benefits. The President elect Joe Biden has indicated to rejoin the Obama brokered Iranian nuclear deal which is expected to keep the Iranian nuclear calculus under check. In consequence, **Iran would also be constrained not to escalate the military ante in the face of enhanced military deterrence of Israel and Sunni nations combine with US back up.** Moreover, establishment of an independent Palestinian nation may also taper down Iranian anti Israel stance, this being the primary cause of confrontation.

Iran as on date enjoys the reputation of most effective professional military force in the region as seen in the Syrian theatre. Hence, there is an air of confidence amongst her Shiite bandwagon and her extra regional allies. The Iran is seen to be using her nuclear capabilities to shape the leadership space in a perceptible manner within Islamic dispensation. The nuclear calculus of Iran is central to her strategic value and stability of West Asian region. Iran is seized with this geo political import and appears to be using it to attain position of strength to strike a better deal with the new US administration through current tranche of aggressive moves.

Lifting of economic sanctions and reviving her energy supply chain seems to be the Iranian primary objective as of now. In case of Israel, Iran may be looking at **full sovereign powers to the putative Palestinian state and return of occupied areas to Syria and Lebanon** as her conditions to taper down her obstinate political stance. On other hand, the US may be looking at stricter provisions to reverse the nuclear calculus somewhat short of Trump plan as their pre condition to accord concessions to Iran.

There appears to be a silver lining with ongoing strategic reshaping of the West Asian region with prospects reconciliations and an air of accommodation. Given the trust deficit and political intransigence shaded by religious narratives, the optimism of possible regional stability sounds difficult, but not impossible. What one needs in such a situation is a

common friend who can be a catalyst in the process of such political reconciliations.

It is time for influential powers to pitch in to grasp the opportunity in offering to facilitate regional societal harmony and equitable politico-economic prudence. India, with good relations with most of the nations, is in a unique position to facilitate such a move to contribute towards ushering in peace and stability in the region. **The earlier Iranian political conundrum is given a positive trajectory, better it would be for the region and world peace.** It is a diplomatic opportunity and a challenge to bring about transformation of a disturb region of utmost importance to India. Apropos, we need to use our soft power and strategic pull pro actively in this international calling in our long term national interests.

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