

Iran's nuclear threshold game

by GWYNNE DYER

'A glance at the history of nuclear weapons manufacture shows that all 11 countries that wished to build bombs did so within three to 10 years,' wrote Yossi Melman, intelligence and strategic affairs correspondent for Israel's Haaretz newspaper, on Sunday. So why, he asked, has Iran failed to do it in over thirty years of trying?

Maybe, Melman suggests, it's because Iran doesn't really want to build nuclear weapons. Maybe it just wants to be a 'threshold' nuclear power, always able to finish the job quickly if it really needs to.

This is not exactly a new thought, but it's the first time I have seen it in the Israeli media. It's also the first time I've seen the obvious question put so plainly: how could any country possibly spin the job out that long?

Iran has 80 million people with adequate scientific and technological skills. At any point in the past fifty years it could certainly have built nuclear weapons in less than ten years if it had gone all out. It didn't. Why not?

Iran's original nuclear weapons programme was started by the Shah in the 1970s with the blessing of the United States, which was hoping to make him the pro-American policeman of the Middle East.

Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionaries shut that programme down when they seized power in 1979. They reckoned they didn't need it. The only country in the Middle East that does have nuclear weapons is Israel, and the Iranian assessment has always been that it won't be reckless with them.

What really does get the Iranians going is nuclear threats from OTHER countries. The first time was after Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran (with US support) in 1980. Iraq really did have a nuclear weapons programme, Iraqi ballistic missiles were already falling on Iranian cities, and so at some point during that eight-year war Iran restarted the Shah's nuclear weapons project.

Saddam's invasion of Iran failed, however, and his subsequent invasion of Kuwait and defeat in the 1990-91 Gulf war ended with the dismantling of Iraq's nuclear facilities under UN supervision. So Iran's nuclear weapons programme went back into hibernation. How can we be sure? Melman's '10-year rule': if Iran had kept going, surely it would have nukes by now.

The next panic was in 1998, when India and Pakistan each tested half a dozen nuclear weapons. India is no threat to Iran, but Pakistan potentially is. It is a powerful Sunni Muslim state (220 million people) right next-door to Iran, the world's only major Shia country.

Sunni extremists have never gained power in Pakistan, but there is a big jihadi influence that even extends into the army. Iran panicked again, and in 1999 it secretly restarted its nuclear weapons programme.

That only ran until 2002, however, when an anti-regime Iranian revolutionary group, Mujahedin-e-Khalk, spilled the beans in public. Sanctions were imposed on Iran, and work on nuclear weapons once again ceased.

So the 'mystery' is solved. The Iranian nuclear weapons programme has not been active for a total of ten years, let alone ten continuous years. And Iran was willing to sign the internationally guaranteed ten-year deal to stop all potentially nuclear weapons-related work in 2015, because it is already close enough in terms of being a 'threshold' state.

There is the same constant tug-of-war between the rational actors and the ultra-hawks in Tehran as there is in Washington, Moscow and Beijing, but most of the time the grown-ups are in charge. If they lose the argument to the extremists in next year's Iranian election, it will be because Donald Trump pulled out of that deal and reimposed sanctions in Iran.

Why did he do that when even his own intelligence services were saying the Iranians were keeping their promises under that deal? Because the deal was part of Barack Obama's legacy, all of which Trump is determined to destroy, and for no better reason.

Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu does have a rational reason for wanting to destroy the deal, however. His intelligence services also told him that Iran was fulfilling its commitments under the deal, but he needs the Iranian nuclear 'threat' in order to win Israeli elections.

Does the phrase 'rogue states' spring to mind?