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French Nuclear Policy Towards Iran: From the Shah to the Islamic Republic

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ABSTRACT

Since 2005, European and French foreign policy towards Iran have been caught between the change of Iran policy under Republican and Democrat administrations, on the one hand, and the Islamic Republic nuclear diplomacy on the other hand. To illustrate this argument, the article will provide a detailed history of Iranian-French relations, particularly pertaining to nuclear technology. The French discourse on a future nuclear Iranian threat reflects the dominant discourse within Western nuclear-weapon states on the nuclear 'other'. Therefore, this article aims to shed light on the growing gap between France's official nuclear ideology and the reality of internal and diplomatic developments of the Iranian nuclear program. I will deconstruct the official discourse produced in France on the Iranian quest for nuclear power to explore the complexity of the factors determining Iran's nuclear choices and the conclusion of the 2015 Nuclear Deal.

Introduction

This article aims to shed light on France's diplomatic role vis-à-vis Iran from the 1970s onwards and on the role (or the absence of role) played by the French mediations in the nuclear tensions between Iran and the 'international community'. It explains shifts in French policy vis-a-vis the Iranian nuclear programme and identifies the role of the strategists and the so-called French 'neoconservatives' in the new Iran policy of Paris after 2005–2007, based on a uniquely rich set of primary sources detailed below.

This fills a triple gap in the literature. First, there is currently no comprehensive study of the French-Iranian nuclear cooperation and tensions over a long period, namely from the 1970s until today. Some articles are dealing with the EU-3 group as a case study to tackle the broader issue of the role that informal organisations can play in international diplomacy.¹ Other studies are dealing with European-Iranian relations as a supranational level but do not analyse the diversity of bilateral relations between Iran and each of the European member States.² More particularly, no published research is offering

a detailed historical approach of French-Iranian encounters in the nuclear sphere since the 1970s³ whereas a large number of studies deal with France's so-called Arab policy.⁴ Second, while one can find important studies on the Turkish-Brazilian⁵ and Russian⁶ mediations on the Iranian nuclear issue since the outset of the crisis in 2002, there is no comprehensive study concerning the role of France as a would-be mediator on this issue. Third, the evidentiary base about nuclear diplomacy with Iran faces a problem of self-censorship of former diplomats and the political bias of their respective narratives on the nuclear negotiations. Indeed, this base is mainly composed of documents from the US⁷ and British archives,⁸ as well as contributions of former members of the Obama administrations involved in the negotiations of the 'Iran Deal'⁹ and of European diplomats involved in nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran since 2003. The anecdotal dimension of testimonies and the subjective interpretations of facts are among the main shortcomings of personal testimonies on nuclear negotiations with Iran since their outset in 2003 and, more broadly, on diplomatic encounters between Iran and the West since 1979.

To offer an in-depth study of the French-Iranian nuclear relations which avoids the pitfalls of the existing evidentiary base, this article expands the range of sources on which the analysis is based, on the French as well as Iranian side.¹⁰ On the Iranian side, my corpus of sources is composed of published memoirs, media and think tanks' publication and intellectual contributions of Iranian nuclear actors themselves and not only on interviews with former representatives of the Iranian nuclear programme, especially the testimony of its founding father, Akbar Etemad.¹¹ This corpus is worth studying as it gives us the possibility to analyse the discourse produced by political actors and/or technical experts involved in the Iranian nuclear programme during two different periods : 1957–1979 and 1982–2020. Some of them (for instance Reza Khazaneh) were working for the Iranian nuclear programme during two different political regimes: the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic.¹² On the French side, I used French diplomatic archives on the economic relationship between France and Iran during the 1970s and memoirs and accounts of French diplomats and former minister involved in the negotiating process with Tehran.¹³ It is completed by personal interviews with French and Iranian diplomats in Paris (2018–2020).

This set of sources allows me to deconstruct the French official political narrative on the history of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and confront it to Iranian perceptions and third party material. The French state will not be analysed as a unitary actor but rather as a space where competing narratives of several administrative bodies are produced. First, there is the perception of the French Ministry for the Economy and Finance (Bercy) focusing more on the potential of economic cooperation with Iran in particular before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, between 1991 and 2005 and again between 2013 and May 2018 at the

time of US withdrawal from the Iran Deal under the Trump administration. Second, one has to consider the perception of the department of the Quai d'Orsay dealing with the North Africa and the Middle East regions (ANMO)¹⁴ which focus on the economic and regional dimensions of the bilateral relation with Iran and adopt a short-term State-based realist approach. This group of diplomats could be labelled 'realist regionalists' and was influential in the 1970s and again between 1991 and 2007. Third, we must take into account the perception of the group of diplomats called 'the sect' or 'the strategists',¹⁵ whose influence started rising in the 1990s, focusing on the issue of non-proliferation after the end of the Cold War.¹⁶ I will argue that their obsession with the Iranian nuclear issue eventually produced a change in French-Iranian relations during the period 2005–2007 based on the assumption that a 'nuclear Iran' should be avoided at all costs, including a military intervention, because it will then become a competitor for the French status as a nuclear-weapon State.¹⁷

The role of the economic drivers in France-Iranian nuclear encounters

During Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi's reign (1941–1979), the Iranian Shah's admiration for General De Gaulle¹⁸ led some French observers to speak of 'Shiite Gaullism' in connection with the Iranian nuclear program.¹⁹ France was then considered a top European partner. The personal relationship between De Gaulle and the Shah is mentioned as a key foundation of the 'excellent relations' between France and Iran and the reason explaining the 'comprehensive understanding' between the two countries.²⁰ According to Quai d'Orsay in 1969, this privileged partnership was based on the fact that 'Iranian and French people share the same temperament facilitating intellectual exchanges'.²¹ This positive perception became an economic reality after Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's election victory over François Mitterrand in 1974. Even before the election, the Shah had not hidden his preference for the former. The Shah's visit to France in June 1974 was marked by the strengthening of cooperation in many fields, including sensitive areas such as armaments, telecommunications, the automobile industry and nuclear energy.²² In February 1974, the first French-Iranian mixed commission met, chaired by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, then Minister of Finance, and Houchang Ansari, his Iranian counterpart. The Iranian delegation declared its intention to order five nuclear power plants with a total capacity of 5,000 megawatts for an amount between 6 and 10 billion francs depending on the sources.²³ This meant five or six reactors. This amount includes the creation of a centre for nuclear research in Iran in the city of Isfahan.²⁴ Ultimately, the only definitive contract was eventually signed in October 1977 for two 900-megawatt reactors, forming the Karun power station in the province of Khuzestan.²⁵ This was the Darkhovin nuclear plant project that was supposed to be completed in 1982 and 1983.²⁶

The intention to order reactors for 5,000 megawatts was reaffirmed during the Shah's visit to France in June 1974. Several agreements were signed: an agreement on scientific cooperation on nuclear issues; an investment guarantee agreement; a financial agreement. The methods of implementation would be specified in the following months. A more precise nuclear cooperation agreement was signed in December 1974 by Michel d'Ornano, Minister of Industry, which notably provided for Iran's participation in the Eurodif project.²⁷ France had promised to build reactors in Iran, but first asked for a loan to build a gas diffusion plant in France. In 1974, Iran agreed to invest \$1 billion in an enrichment facility, which would then provide services to a holding company in which the Iranians had a partial interest, the French state-owned Cogema holding the majority.²⁸ According to the contract, Iran would have the right to buy some of the enriched uranium, but the French side would retain full control over the supply of enriched uranium to Tricastin.²⁹

Iran also undertook to entrust France with the creation of a nuclear research and development centre with the support of the Technicatome company. It would be inaugurated in Isfahan in 1975, and Reza Khazaneh would be its first director.³⁰ The ambition to build four additional reactors after the Darkhovin nuclear plant was recalled during the French-Iranian meetings without any implementation of new nuclear projects. In November 1977, Framatome made a preliminary offer for the construction of four new reactors but this new nuclear project was stopped by the political turmoil of the Islamic Revolution (1978–1979). All in all, France had undertaken to construct ten nuclear reactors in Iran.³¹

The official objective of the Iranian authorities was to reach between 23,000 and 24,000 megawatts of operational electrical capacity by 1994.³² To reach this goal, there was a need to build 20 nuclear reactors. At that time, the Iranian imperial regime was upset by Washington's attitude towards the risk of nuclear proliferation. The US was worried that Iran, based on its cooperation with France and Germany in nuclear energy, would develop weapons. This US proliferation concern increased due to the development of international cooperation around Iranian nuclear power.³³ On the other side, the Carter administration's inflexibility led Iran to seek more accommodating partners in Europe.³⁴ The Shah was personally invested in the nuclear issue and he had a personal relationship with Akbar Etemad, the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization. Going nuclear was a national priority.³⁵ The Darkhovin nuclear plant, which had a maximum of 5,000 employees, was 10% to 20% completed in 1979 depending on the sources.³⁶ Regarding the uranium enrichment facility in Tricastin, in January 1979, Prime Minister Bakhtiar publicly announced the suspension of nuclear contracts, by a simple four-line note to the French Embassy in Tehran,³⁷ seemingly without care for the legal aspects. This political statement ending the nuclear bilateral cooperation

between Paris and Tehran was one of the main reasons for the legal and financial disputes of the 1980s between the two countries.

The 1973–74 oil crisis is a key factor to understand the new French regional policy in the Middle East, and especially the economic partnership with both imperial Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Indeed, beyond the oil price shock was a weakening of French democratic ideals that pushed the country into a new relationship with the oil states of the Middle East. The weakening of democratic ideals was also linked to the way in which France tried to overcome this dependence by turning to the oil-producing countries to reduce its energy bill. The mercantile dimension was thus pre-eminent in the definition of French-Iranian relations from 1973 to 1979. As Denis Bauchard points out, it is a question of 'organising what was called at the time "recycling of capital" (...) and the promotion of the French economic presence in the Middle East'.³⁸ Iran became the first client for French exports to the Middle East and its second oil supplier. Nevertheless, France represented only a 5% share of the Iranian market, far behind the United States, Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom.³⁹

Nonetheless, this new abundance of oil led Iran to an economic deadlock that major industrial infrastructure projects could not hide. This trend was confirmed in Iran's budgetary revenue in foreign currency from oil and gas. It was also reflected in Iran's vital foreign exchange receipts from oil and gas: According to Robert Graham, *[a]fter an increase of 200% in 1974/5, the increase dropped in the following year to 2%. In the two years from March 1975 to March 1977 receipts grew at an average of just under 5%. Yet during the same period total expenditure increased three times as fast*.⁴⁰ The end of the imperial regime resulted in a pause in the Iranian nuclear program which would only gradually resume between 1982–1984 in the context of the First Gulf War (1980–88).

The new Iranian foreign policy based on an anti-Western ideology (khomeinism) meant the end of the French-Iranian alliance initiated by General De Gaulle. French friendship with Saddam Hussein and France's co-belligerent status alongside the Iraqi regime during the first Gulf War (1980–88)⁴¹ transformed bilateral nuclear cooperation into a source of conflict. The Eurodif dispute would not be settled until the early 1990s, but cooperation in civil nuclear power never resumed. Finally, while the French strategic community sought to rebalance its bilateral relations in the Persian Gulf for the benefit of Iran after the Second Gulf War (1991),⁴² it is clear that the limits of this new economic partnership can be best seen in the history of the French oil company Total's presence in the Iranian oil and gas sector from 1996 (South Pars 2 and 3)⁴³ until the company's withdrawal from South Pars 11 in 2018.⁴⁴ This economic partnership was first interrupted due to the new Iran policy of French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who decided in July 2007 to sacrifice French economic interests in Iran to better promote the cause of

nuclear non-proliferation. Paris then moved from a vision of Iran mainly based on regional issues and the promotion of economic interests to an Iran policy shaped by a 'strategic' outlook that focused almost exclusively on the so-called Iranian nuclear threat.

I argue that this was the result of the takeover of the Iranian nuclear dossier by the strategists against the realist regionalists within the French bureaucratic system. This ideological victory of the so-called French Iran hawks was based on the accusation that the regionalists were too close to regional authoritarian regimes in general and the Iranian one in particular since the beginning of the 1990s. The strategists used the Iranian nuclear 'threat' as a way to provide a new definition of French national interests based on the sole idea of non-proliferation rather than a more balance policy that is also taking into account the defence of French economic interests. This new French policy ended in 2013–5 with the negotiation and the conclusion of the Iran deal and the effort of the French companies to reinvest the Iranian market after their first withdrawal in 2007 under the pressure of the French government under the Sarkozy presidency.⁴⁵

The production of the official French nuclear discourse on Iran

On nuclear Iran, the official French discourse hesitates between a will to give a definitive answer regarding the nature of the Iranian nuclear programme and an almost impossibility to prove the military dimension of Iranian ambitions because of the absence of a smoking gun. In other words, French officials want to definitely say that Iran's nuclear program is a military one but don't have proof. This inability to prove the case of an Iranian military programme is mainly due to the difficulties to access to reliable sources of information inside Iran. The high level of secrecy maintained by the Iranian side and the difficulty of raising suspicions on the diversion of fissile material are also important factors explaining the lack of Western knowledge about the Iranian nuclear programme. This idea of an Iranian bomb first appeared in the US in the 1970s at the time of the Pahlavi regime.⁴⁶ According to Anthony Cordesman and Khalid Al-Rodhan, there are many US predictions of an Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons that have been set since 1991. In 1991, congressional reports and CIA assessments estimates with a 'high degree of certainty' that Iran has the capability to build two or three nuclear weapons.⁴⁷

In February 1992 again a report by the U.S. House of representatives mentions that Iranian nuclear weapons could become operational before April 1992.⁴⁸ These predictions continue until today but failed to materialise again and again. This tendency to set dates was first stopped by the publication of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in 2007. This report suggests that Iran has stopped the militarisation of its nuclear programme in 2003.⁴⁹ This difficulty to assess possible dates for acquisition of nuclear weapons by the

Islamic Republic of Iran is a reminder of the main bias in the nuclear study literature regarding an unquestioned Iranian desire to acquire nuclear weapons. This discrepancy between alleged knowledge and actual knowledge is present in the US but also in France. This is what Benoît Pelopidas calls 'epistemic vulnerability' which opens a space for overconfidence in the validity of existing knowledge. He also notes that

research has already shown the number of problematic postulates shared by French expertise (. . .) and official discourse: 1) an overall vision of the history of the nuclear age as the history of proliferation, 2) the idea of a strictly defensive French nuclear weapons system that poses no risk; 3) the assertion of nuclear deterrence as a guarantor of peace during the Cold War. Such assumptions limit the conceivable change to horizontal proliferation and the possibility of a nuclear explosion by actors other than 'us': terrorists or 'proliferators'. Because of the high rate of repetition of these postulates, the reader may consider that these are not postulates, but established truths.⁵⁰

The Iranian example is used in the official French discourse to justify the priority given by French nuclear strategists to horizontal proliferation. According to this perspective, there is amongst the 'expert community', in France, this presentation of an unstoppable 'Iranian military nuclear program' which shows 'the limits of diplomatic solutions to the new proliferation crises'.⁵¹ This displayed certainty is the consequence of a conceptual bias which is embodied in the notion of proliferation. In other words, it assumes the inevitability of the spread of nuclear technology to new states.⁵² In addition, at the beginning of the 2000s, the reference to the 'Islamic bomb' was very present following a shift of this problem from Islamabad to Tehran. Thus, concern over nuclear proliferation in 'Islamic' countries permeates the thinking of the media and influential conservative commentators.⁵³ In official French speech, this is reflected in the link established between the nature of the Iranian Islamic regime and its nuclear program. A similar point has previously been raised by Hugh Gusterson: 'There is a common perception in the West that nuclear weapons are most dangerous when they are in the hands of Third World'.⁵⁴ There is an Islamisation of the perception of the Iranian nuclear program. This new perception is a way for dominant media and official discourse to rationalise and to justify the existing nuclear order which tends to transform a Western perception into a universal analytical tool.⁵⁵ The Iranian authorities often present their country as a victim of a 'nuclear apartheid'.⁵⁶

There is also a dominant discourse in the academic, political and defence worlds in France and the United States. The latter promotes the idea that even if we can live with the nuclear weapons of the five official nuclear states for an indefinite future, the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the so-called nuclear threshold states of the Third World, in particular the Islamic world, would be extremely dangerous.⁵⁷ In other words, the French, and more generally Western, discourse on nuclear proliferation is ideological,⁵⁸ because among

other things, it aims at legitimising the nuclear monopoly of the official nuclear weapons states as recognised by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁵⁹

There is therefore a double standard on the Iranian nuclear issue as defined in the official French discourse. This is due to the fact that arguments put forward by France to legitimise its nuclear program can be used by Iran to defend its own.⁶⁰ French criticism of Iran highlighting the nuclear program's lack of economic rationality can also be applied to the French nuclear program,⁶¹ and the same logic can be applied to the question of Iran's right to have a ballistic missile program alongside its nuclear program. Khamenei often refers to the European and US double-standard while criticising Iranian nuclear capabilities and missile programme. In 2017, he explains that:

If European governments say the same thing that the US is saying, if they say why Iran is present in the region – well, what is that to you? Why should it not be present? Or when they echo the US criticisms about us having missiles with a range of two, three thousand kilometers, this does not make sense. What is it to you? Why do you yourselves have missiles? Why do you yourselves have nuclear missiles? Why do you have atomic weapons? If they want to interfere in the defensive power of the Islamic Republic and speak against it, this cannot be done. We will not accept this from the Europeans in any way! They should not sing along with the US when it sings songs of bullying and foolishness.⁶²

This is the question of mirror imaging in the discourse of nuclear-weapon states dealing with proliferation issues.⁶³ Furthermore, the economic arguments used by France to justify its own civilian nuclear program are taken up by Iran.⁶⁴ France's nuclear anxiety is reflected in the construction of an unpredictable, fanatical and irrational Iranian other. To do this, the official French discourse, projected by French nuclear experts and spokespersons of the government,⁶⁵ creates an artificial connection between an Iranian 'military' nuclear program with the nature of the regime of the Islamic Republic.⁶⁶ For instance, in December 2006, during a lunch-meeting with the US Policy Planning Director Stephen Krasner with 'three of France's leading strategic thinkers: Therese Delpech, director of strategic affairs, Atomic Energy Agency; Bruno Tertrais, head of research, Foundation for Strategic Affairs (FRS); and Francois Heisbourg, special advisor, FRS', this issue was mentioned. The diplomatic cable outlines that:

All three analysts offered a grim portrait of an intransigent Iran run by a secretive cabal of mullahs deliberately blind to international realities and a president who views opposition to the United States as the basis of his popular support. The Iranian leadership – including the Guardian Council and President Ahmadinejad – has lost any sense of limits, and their certainty that they need not fear a U.S. military strike could give rise to a major miscalculation, they added.⁶⁷

The official French discourse on Iran is tailored to show both the inevitable and unacceptable character of nuclear proliferation at the level of a country, Iran, but also at the Middle East regional level. In the same diplomatic cable the three French ‘strategists’ told the US representative that “absent tough talk from the U.S., Iran would continue to develop a nuclear weapons’ program and scorn the IAEA with total impunity” and, according to this scenario, ‘the U.S. would soon also have to contend with the imminent nuclear ambitions of moderate Gulf States that fear Iran as an irresponsible rival’.⁶⁸ This hypothesis assumes that other Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, would follow the example of the Islamic Republic and start developing military nuclear programs.⁶⁹ However, French discourse insists, since the period 2005–07, on a distinction between Iranian regional policy and the nuclear question. This denial of the connection between the regional behaviour of Iran and the US policy regarding the nuclear question⁷⁰ was not shared by the Obama Administration, which took into account the effect of the nuclear confrontation between Washington and Tehran on stability in Iraq.

In addition, Nicolas Roche, the French ambassador in Tehran since the fall of 2022, former director of strategy at the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) and Director of strategic affairs at Quai d’Orsay, one of the few people expressing French official position in public in France on the issue of the Iranian nuclear program, claims at the same time that Tehran’s regional policy is in no way linked to the Iranian nuclear program⁷¹ and that the NPT is made to protect non-nuclear-weapon states from their neighbours.⁷² The role of the Obama Administration is perceived in an ambiguous way in the official French discourse. On the one hand, Nicolas Roche criticises the Obama administration’s ‘non-concerted’ efforts with the EU 3 group. On the other hand, he explains the importance of the precursory role of Brussels in the success of the diplomatic process. He also acknowledges the decisive role of the Obama Administration in the post-2013 negotiations without mentioning the limited role of Brussels as a junior partner of Washington.⁷³ As Trita Parsi explains: ‘*The French (. . .) had earned a reputation of being more hawkish on this issue [of Iranian uranium enrichment on its soil] than the Obama administration*’.⁷⁴ Despite the omission of the French diplomats to recognise an Iranian capability to enrich uranium on Iranian soil, among the short-term incentives explaining the Iranian decision to seek a nuclear compromise, Nicolas Roche mentions the Israeli military threats, the election of Rouhani and the role of EU⁷⁵ and US unilateral economic sanctions. Nevertheless, he fails to acknowledge the US change of policy to initiate a direct dialogue with the Islamic Republic without preconditions as well as the US’s abandonment of its objective of regime change under the Obama Administration. The very same omission regarding the decisive role of the Obama Administration can be found in the account by Gérard Araud,⁷⁶ another French official, who claims that Iran developed a ‘military’ nuclear program in 2003 and that ‘*the*

*Americans were ready to negotiate with the Iranians since 2009; the maintenance of a residual enrichment capacity in Iran had been on the negotiating map for years even if it had never been officially confirmed since . . . the Iranians were not negotiating!*⁷⁷

What is interesting here is a triple denial: of the continuity in French Iranian policy before and after 2005–7, of the French and European inability to define the Western strategic line and of the decisive nature of the change in the U.S. position initiated by the Obama Administration in the explanation of the short-lived diplomatic victory of 2015.⁷⁸

First, none of the French diplomatic actors acknowledge the US decision to allow the Islamic Republic to maintain a limited enriched uranium facility on its territory as a turning-point in the diplomatic encounter between Iran and the West.⁷⁹ This was, however, a determining factor leading to the Iran Deal of 2015. To hide the French diplomatic difficulty confronting the Iranian dossier, the diplomats present a biased version of the account of the diplomatic process: the Iranian refusal to negotiate became an absolute and constant factor until the final reversal (2013–2015). This Iranian inability to compromise (almost a cultural factor according in this view) is therefore a useful tool to justify the failure of French and European diplomatic efforts from 2003 to 2013. On the whole, French diplomatic sources are pretending that they are independent from the US, even though they very much follow the US position during both Republican and Democrat Administrations.⁸⁰

A contrario, in his memoirs, John Kerry mentions the anger of European officials in general and Laurent Fabius in particular⁸¹ when a secret Iranian-US discussion channel in 2013 was made public. Laurent Fabius was playing the role of the ‘bad cop’ during the nuclear negotiation and he went so far in pushing for a tougher diplomatic line that he could have jeopardised the whole nuclear negotiation process.⁸² He presents his version:

As soon as I arrive on November 8 at the end of the morning, I present to my counterparts, and in particular to John Kerry, our requests to strengthen the text on five major points that we believe are necessary: an explicit commitment Iran’s not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons; the question long-term enrichment (which Iran wants unconditionally); a satisfactory processing of the 20% enriched uranium stockpile (Iran requires take into account, from the first six-month period, the needs related to its future research reactors); limiting the production of centrifuges to the sole replacement of broken centrifuges; suspension of all activities related to the construction of the Arak reactor and the manufacturing and testing of its fuel.⁸³

He also mentions that ‘France will not agree to a discount deal’.⁸⁴ This French official version is at the centre of the official narrative presenting France as a key player able to improve the terms of the Deal. This version minimises the leading role of US-Iran direct diplomatic interactions in the process. This also contradicts the Iranian preference to negotiate directly with the Americans but not with the Europeans.⁸⁵ Yet David Cvach, a former diplomatic advisor to

François Hollande, continues to say that Brussels should get credit for the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran: ‘Never mind that the US owes its only diplomatic success in the Middle East in more than 2 decades – the JCPOA – to the Europeans. After opposing their efforts and before undermining the agreement’.⁸⁶

The second denial of the French diplomats regarding their own role has to do with the limits of European economic leverage over Tehran independently from the US. This is indeed one of the main reasons why European economic incentives were not taken seriously in Tehran without any US backing.

This economic dependence and the need for Brussels to bet on Washington’s goodwill while dealing with economic matters hamper Europe’s ability to play a decisive diplomatic role on the Iranian nuclear issue. According to Stanislas de Laboulaye, Former Director General of Political and Security Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002–2006),⁸⁷ the failure of the first phase of the international negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue between 2005 and 2006 can be best explained by the double refusal of the Bush junior administration: John Bolton’s refusal of an economic normalisation with Iran, with the gradual lifting of US sanctions which hamper Iran’s international trade, and US refusal to recognise Iran’s ‘right to enrich uranium’.⁸⁸ This narrative is contested by Gérard Araud who denies the existence of John Bolton’s red lines in 2004–2005 and claims that it is only the Iranians who are responsible for the failure of these negotiations by their refusal to negotiate.⁸⁹

From Sarkozy to Macron: France as a diplomatic mediator

At the end of the year 2007, President Sarkozy presented himself as a mediator between Washington and Tehran.⁹⁰ This new diplomatic ambition was in contradiction with the hardening of the French position on the Iranian nuclear issue. It was therefore not surprising that this mediation failed, and Paris’ diplomatic initiative was in fact stillborn. Indeed, following the visit of Ali Akbar Velayati, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic adviser to the Supreme Leader, the French proposal for ‘large-scale bilateral nuclear cooperation in exchange for abandoning the activities of enrichment’ on Iranian territory⁹¹ was rejected by the Islamic Republic because of the priority given by Tehran to direct negotiations with Washington, avoiding the European intermediary.⁹² The French criticism of the Swiss mediation is based on the assumption that the Swiss diplomatic action is a hurdle to Western efforts to pressure the Islamic Republic of Iran; This idea of Switzerland being too soft with the Islamic Republic has to be understood in the framework of a European diplomatic presence in Tehran while the US has had no diplomatic representation there since 1979. Finally, there is also the idea that the Swiss ambassador Tim Guldman went beyond his diplomatic

mandate with an idea of ‘grand bargain’ in 2003.⁹³ A French-leading strategist, François Heisbourg, is going further in his criticism of the Swiss mediation on the Iranian issue. According to a US Diplomatic cable,

Heisbourg [...] stridently asserted that the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran is a “very imperfect lens” through which to view Iranian society, although he would not elaborate.⁹⁴

The rupture of 2005–2007 in the official French discourse on Iran can be best explained by several factors: the regional policy of France, which focuses on relations with the Arab shore of the Persian Gulf and with Israel; the interests of the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission [CEA] and its obsession with Iranian nuclear programme,⁹⁵ as well as the choice to privilege the alliance with the United States by abandoning the objective of independence.⁹⁶ However, the Atlanticist dimension of Sarkozy’s foreign policy did not imply a break in the definition of France’s overall objectives, which remained unchanged. What changed were the means of achieving them. The new policy was based on the idea that France would be in a better position to achieve its ambitions within the framework of the Atlantic alliance and the EU.⁹⁷ The turning point in Sarkozy’s foreign policy is clearly mentioned in the 2008 white paper on defence (*Livre blanc*), which makes the Iranian nuclear program a ‘major threat, likely to disrupt international security in the years to come’.⁹⁸ To prevent the nuclearisation of Iran became a strategic priority for France. The third denial of the refusal to acknowledge this policy change vis-à-vis Iran in 2005–2007, however, continues to be at the centre of the discourse of the majority of French diplomatic actors involved in this process.

According to Gérard Araud, the existence of a French ideological version of neoconservatism is an invention. This opinion is a way to justify the denial of a policy change initiative by the so-called French neoconservatives:

France maintained, from 2003 to 2015, the same firm line. This has been the case under three Presidents of the Republic [...] and seven Ministers of Foreign Affairs does not confirm the claim that our country has joined the camp of the neo-conservatives which it had opposed in Iraq.⁹⁹

This analysis is the product of an official narrative based on key talking points (*EDL, éléments de langage*). Along with Justin Vaïsse, the then Director of the French Policy Planning Staff (CAPS), he wrongly claims that there is no change in French Iran policy from 2003 until today. Nevertheless, in July 2007, president Sarkozy decided to sacrifice French economic interests in Iran to comply with US unilateral sanctions as well as to put in place and to implement a new regime of economic sanctions at the European level. The objective is to use all the economic tools available in order to reach the goal of a non-nuclear Iran.¹⁰⁰ Some weeks later the new slogan of the French diplomacy became ‘an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran’. This slogan means

that French diplomacy at the time sees only two possibilities: an Iranian quest for the bomb or the bombing of Iran by Israel and/or the USA. French-style Iran hawks¹⁰¹ also supported the Green Movement, an Iranian democratic social movement in 2009–10 by focusing on the Islamic Republic's violation of human rights. At the same time, Rama Yade, Secretary of State for human rights was instructed never to speak about the human rights situation in China.¹⁰²

The idea that the Islamic Republic could accept a limited opening focusing on economic relations with the outside world is then seen in Paris as contrary to the nature of the regime. That is why the only solution would be to use the threat of military intervention against the Iranian nuclear installations and, at the same time, to pursue a policy of regime change against a totalitarian state, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Obama administration's policy of engaging Iran was perceived by the French Iran hawks as 'naïve', because in Washington, after the election of Obama, the new US Administration was expecting to obtain quickly results with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition, there is ideological hostility on the part of the French-style neoconservatives towards the idea of offering Iran economic incentives in exchange for concessions on the nuclear issue. This ideological position is based on the conviction that if US or European companies are used as a diplomatic tool in nuclear negotiations, this will be perceived as a Western weakness by Iranian leaders. This reasoning turned out to be wrong a few years later when the nuclear agreement was signed in 2015 between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5 + 1 group.

Ethnocentrism is one of the causes of failure of the French Iran hawks analysis on the Iranian nuclear dossier. Indeed, the idea promoted inside the group of French strategists is that 'Iranian are liars' and 'they understand only force'.¹⁰³ This cultural bias is the main factor explaining the lack of understanding among them of the promise of the new Iran policy of the Obama administration. Their pessimism was based on the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran will not respect its word and therefore it was a waste of time to negotiate a diplomatic compromise with such a political entity. This ethnocentrism was also grounded on the confusion of this group of French diplomats between 'being Iranian' and 'being an agent of the Islamic Republic'. They did not understand that the Iranian identity was going beyond the definition given by the Islamic Republic and that even in an authoritarian regime, public opinion has a role, albeit limited, in shaping strategic decisions. Without any knowledge of contemporary Iranian society and history, this group of nuclear experts did not understand the complexity of the decision-making process on the nuclear issue inside the Islamic Republic.

Their refusal to study the factors explaining the Iranian nuclear quest and the use of arguments of authority to justify the double standard of Paris between, on the one hand, the denunciation of the Iranian nuclear program

and, on the other, the refusal to raise the issue of Israel's unacknowledged possession of nuclear weapons demonstrate the politization of the question of nuclear proliferation amongst the French strategists. In addition, this official discourse emphasises the role of France in the European framework but it denies the major role of the United States and the constructive proposals of Russia, in particular the so-called 'step by step' proposal by Lavrov in 2011 which will inspire the diplomatic method leading to the signing of the JCPOA on 14 July 2015.

Finally, a question arises: why did France, in the 1970s, accept this same Iranian nuclear program with an ambiguity regarding its end goal, peaceful or military, and why did Paris start criticising it from the 1990s onwards? It is quite simply because the imperial regime was considered an ally and the Islamic Republic a rival of the West. Why not simply recognise that the French position on the nuclear problem is largely determined by the fear of French diplomatic actors vis-à-vis the Iranian regime? In official discourse, the issues of Iran's nuclear sovereignty, prestige and national pride are never addressed. An autopsy of the failure of the French Iran hawks strategy vis-à-vis Iran remains to be written.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the strategist approach was more and more disconnected from the reality of the evolution of the nuclear negotiation between Washington and Tehran from 2011 until 2013. The French legal claims about the absence of an Iranian right to enrich uranium under the NPT was not enough to hide another failed political agenda with the conclusion of the Iranian Nuclear Deal in 2015. The Iranian capability to enrich uranium was then recognised mainly due to the political and diplomatic will of the Obama Administration.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, in the Iranian case, the overestimation of the risk of proliferation is explained by the over-representation of the nuclear prism in French analysis of Middle Eastern geopolitical developments. The possible nuclearisation of Iran was presented by President Sarkozy as a catastrophic choice between 'the bomb or the bombardment'¹⁰⁶ of Iran. This 'bomb or bombardment' slogan suggests that only the military option is relevant to preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold and developing a military nuclear capability. Likewise, this vision is based on the assumption that only the acquisition of nuclear weapons could protect Tehran from the bombardment of its territory. This is an explicit reference to the theory of General Lucien Poirier who considers that nuclear weapons sanctify the territory of the state endowed with nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷ Eventually, French official discourse is also the product of a neoconservative turning point in France's Arab policy which accentuates this anti-Iranian prism of French diplomacy.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, it was not surprising that, in 2017, President Macron's new strategy of presenting France as a bridge between the United States and Iran encountered obstacles. Even if Paris argues that there is a risk that Washington's confrontational approach will weaken the Iranian President

while strengthening the conservatives, without credible alternatives to the JCPOA, they say, the preservation of the status quo is preferable to creating a vacuum that favours the most strident factions inside the Iranian political system. Moreover, France has emphasised the importance of international law to achieving non-proliferation.

In the case of the Iran deal, this means respecting the authority of the UN Security Council and the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency as the only legitimate authorities to oversee Iran's compliance with the deal. Paris is also concerned that regime change might return as a US policy option on Iran, even if French policymakers share US concerns over human rights abuses in Iran and the limits of President Rouhani's political authority. Another difference between French and US approaches to Iran is whether to link the JCPOA and Iran's regional behaviour. Paris does not see any relationship between Tehran's support to Shia militias in Iraq or Hezbollah and the JCPOA.

To avoid the Cornelian dilemma between the transatlantic friendship and the promotion of French businesses in Iran, President Emmanuel Macron has presented himself as a mediator between Trump's America and Iran. Yet Macron's strategy faces hurdles. Indeed, the main asset of French diplomacy in dealing with Tehran is the economic incentive for French companies to invest in the country. But, since May 2018, French economic actors have followed US unilateral economic guidelines on Iran – not French ones.¹⁰⁹ The French State has been lacking political will to defend its rhetorical diplomatic support to the JCPOA between 2018 and 2021. The absence of juridical protection against the extraterritoriality of US law both at the national and at the EU level is provoking a crisis of credibility of French and European policy towards Iran. Nevertheless, according to the EU representative for foreign policy, there is a need at the European level to protect European-Iran trade:

Iran, for its part, must return to full compliance with its nuclear obligations; but it also needs to be able to reap the economic benefits envisioned in the agreement. Having already established measures to protect our companies against extraterritorial US sanctions, we in Europe can do more to satisfy Iranian expectations for legitimate trade.¹¹⁰

This idea of a need to bolster European economic sovereignty is still a work in progress more than five years after the conclusion of the Iran Deal and more than two years after the US withdrawal. As a consequence, trade became a source of dispute between European states and Iran. The effect for French-Iranian bilateral relations has been decisive. The fall of bilateral trade and the so-called mediating efforts of France have provoked an Iranian rejection of any French influence on the nuclear dossier. Even if President Rouhani continues to have a dialogue with Emmanuel Macron, one has to consider the return of anti-French feelings amongst the most conservative political

factions inside the Islamic Republic. In other words, rather than a decrease of international tensions around the Iranian nuclear issue and Tehran's regional policy, there is now a bilateral crisis between Tehran and Paris. This the result of French regional alliances (both the 'Arab policy' and the alliance with Israel) as well as the consequences of the untold story of French alignment on the Trump Administration policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The takeover of the Iranian nuclear dossier by the strategists against the regionalists within the French bureaucratic system¹¹² resulted in a growing discrepancy between the French official and media discourse on the Iranian situation, and the reality of the developments in the Iranian nuclear program. Unlike the US system,¹¹³ the absence of change within the French technocratic superstructure, dominated by the *énarques*,¹¹⁴ led the French bureaucratic elites to re-write the history of international negotiations around the Iranian nuclear issue to better dissimulate their analytical shortcomings. The French example illustrates the danger of an approach not taking into account the national and regional specificities for the analysis of nuclear issues. As Ken Booth points out, the problem with strategists is that an explanation based on national stereotypes will always find greater acceptance than one that involves careful and multifaceted examination of the facts.¹¹⁵ On the Iranian nuclear issue, 'ethnocentrism' is an important analytical hurdle because it obstructs one's understanding of the opponent 'software' – his intentions, style, prejudices, hopes and fears".¹¹⁶ These analytical biases largely explain the growing marginalisation of French diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear issue between 2003 and 2015.

Notes

- 1 See Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Benjamin Kienzle, 'Legitimation strategies of informal groups of states: The case of the E3 directoire in the nuclear negotiations with Iran', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2020, Vol. 55(3), pp. 388–405; Tom Sauer, 'The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)', *JCMS*, Volume 57. No. 5, 2019, pp. 939–955.
- 2 See Walter Posch, "Europe and Iran: Unintentional Confrontation?", Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, National Defence Academy, Vienna, August 2019, 4 p. Walter Posch, 'The EU and Iran' in Sven Biscop and Richard G. Whitman (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of European Security*, London and New York 2013, pp. 179–188; Michal Onderco, 'Money can't buy you love: the European Union member states and Iranian nuclear programme 2002–2009', *European Security*, 24:1, 2015, pp. 56–76.
- 3 For an article focusing on the role of the non-proliferation factor in defining French foreign policy, see Nicolas Jabko and Steven Weber, 'A certain idea of nuclear weapons: France's nuclear non-proliferation policy in theoretical perspective', *Security Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 1998, pp. 108–150.

- 4 See for instance Rémy Leveau, 'France's Arab Policy' in L. Carl Brown (ed.), *Diplomacy in the Middle East*.
The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers, London: I.B. Tauris, 2001, pp. 3–20 and Olivier Roy, 'Sur la politique arabe de la France', Paris, *Monde arabe : Maghreb Machrek*, n° 132, 1991, pp. 15–20.
- 5 Elodie Brun, PhD thesis, *Le changement international par les relations Sud-Sud : les liens du Brésil, du Chili et du Venezuela avec les pays en développement d'Afrique, d'Asie et du Moyen-Orient*, Sciences Po Paris, 2012.
- 6 Clément Therme, *Les relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979*, Paris/Genève: PUF/Graduate Institute, 2012.
- 7 See The National Security Archive website, 'Iran's Nuclear Program – Then and Now', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 521 Edited by Malcolm Byrne and William Burr Posted – July 14, 2015. Available: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb521-Irans-Nuclear-Program-1975-vs-2015/> (Last access, 23 February 2020). See also the collection 'Documenting Iran-U.S. Relations, 1978–2015' including some documents dealing with 'Western concerns over Iran's nuclear program, 2002–2010', Dec 19, 2019 Briefing Book #692 Edited by Malcolm Byrne. Available: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2019-12-19/documenting-iran-us-relations-1978-2015> (Last access, 23 February 2020).
- 8 Ali M. Ansari, 'The Curious Case of the Nuclear Company of Britain and Iran', *Iran. Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 55:1, 2017, pp. 73–86. Andrea Ellner, 'British Approaches to Nuclear Proliferation towards Iran and the Middle East', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26/1, 2013, pp. 225–51.
- 9 See John Kerry, *Every Day is Extra*, New York : Simon & Schuster, 2019, chapter 18 : 'Preventing a war'. See Wendy Sherman, Testimony at the Belfer Center, 3 avril 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM-RJmkFdIo>; Wendy R. Sherman, *Not for the Faint of Heart: Lessons in Courage, Power, and Persistence*, New York: Public Affairs, 2018, 256 pages. Wendy R. Sherman, 'How We Got the Iran Deal. And Why We'll Miss It', *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2018, pp. 186–197; Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*, New York: Random House, 2018. Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2014; William Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*, New York : Random House, 2019.
- 10 This article is based on sources collected during two-years of field-work in Iran at the French Institute for Research in Iran (IFRI, Tehran) between 2005 and 2009.
- 11 See for instance, David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*, London: IB Tauris, 2012; Clément Therme, *Les relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979*, Paris/Genève: PUF/Graduate Institute, 2012; Leonard S. Spector, Jacqueline R. Smith, 'Iran', chapter 12, in Leonard S. Spector, *Nuclear Ambitions The Spread Of Nuclear Weapons 1989–1990*, New York: Routledge, 1990; Akbar Etemad, 'First Person: Akbar Etemad. As told to David Patrikarakos', *Financial Times*, 11 July 2009. Available: <https://www.ft.com/content/d38e1cfa-6b63-11de-861d-00144feabdc0> (Last access, 22 February 2020); Akbar Etemad, Interview with Farrokh Ghaffari, Gholam Reza Afkhami, Paris, London, Bethesda, Maryland, November, 1982. Available: <https://fis-iran.org/en/content/etemad-akbar> (Last access, 22 February 2020); Akbar Etemad's biography in Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979*, Volume One, Syracuse/New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008, pp. 134–138.
- 12 See the testimony of Akbar Etemad. Reza Khazaneh and Sadegh Shajari, *Chain Reaction and Chaos. Toward Modern Persia*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2015.

- 13 For a presentation of the point of views of former French diplomats and a Foreign minister, see Gérard Araud, 'Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran', Paris, *Les Carnets du CAPS*, n° 22, January 2016; François Nicoullaud, 'La France et la négociation avec l'Iran', *Confluences Méditerranée*, n° 96, 2016/1, pp. 47–6; François Nicoullaud, *Des atomes, des souris et des hommes : France-Iran, leurs relations nucléaires jusqu'à l'accord de Vienne*, Paris, Hémisphères Editions, 2022; Denis Bauchard, *Le Moyen-Orient au défi du chaos : Un demi-siècle d'échecs et d'espoirs*, Paris: Hémisphères éditions, 2021; Laurent Fabius, 'La genèse de l'accord du 14 juillet 2015 sur le nucléaire iranien', *Revue internationale et stratégique*, n° 102, 2016/2, pp. 6–37; Laurent Fabius, *37 Quai d'Orsay. Diplomatie française 2012–2016*, Paris: Plon, 2016, pp. 57–84.
- 14 On the French internal debate, see Florent Pouponneau, *La politique française de non-prolifération nucléaire. De la division du travail diplomatique*, Bruxelles : Peter Lang, 2015.
- 15 See Vincent Jauvert's chapter on 'la secte' in *La face cachée du Quai d'Orsay*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2016, pp. 241–279; Bertrand Badie, *Nous ne sommes plus seuls au monde*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, pp. 210–220.
- 16 One has to consider that France signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1992 and 'many Americans interpreted this action as a vindication of U.S. theory and practice in non-proliferation'. See, Jabko and Steven Weber, 'A certain idea of nuclear weapons: France's nuclear non-proliferation policy in theoretical perspective', *op. cit.*, p. 108.
- 17 Personal interview with a French strategist and former diplomatic advisor of François Hollande, Paris, 2014.
- 18 Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p. 278.
- 19 Personal interview with François Thual, Paris, May 2014.
- 20 See 'Iran. Notes et documents', Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Direction des Services d'Information et de Presse, 1969, p. 2/6.
- 21 In 1969, 10% of the Iranian students were learning the French language (3.000 students). *Ibid.*
- 22 See the personal archives (*archives privées*) of Denis Bauchard, Ministère de l'économie et des Finances, Quai d'Orsay, 1973–1977.
- 23 See Steve Nadjar, 'La France de Valéry Giscard D'Estaing et l'Iran (1974–1981)', Mémoire Master 2, sous la direction de Maurice Vaïsse, IEP Paris, 2008–2009, p. 40 and p. 52.
- 24 *Les Echos*, 28 June 1974.
- 25 *Le Figaro*, 19 November 1974.
- 26 Steve Nadjar, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- 27 Denis Bauchard, 'Le choc de 1973 et l'affirmation du rôle des pays pétroliers du Moyen-Orient', in *Mémoires*, Paris, unpublished manuscript, 2020.
- 28 'Le conflit entre Eurodif et l'Iran La cour d'appel donne raison à Téhéran', *Le Monde*, 23 avril 1982. Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1982/04/23/le-conflit-entre-eurodif-et-l-iran-la-cour-d-appel-donne-raison-a-teheran_3108638_1819218.html (Last Access, 18 September 2020).
- 29 Jacob Darwin Hamblin, 'The Nuclearisation of Iran in the Seventies', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 5, 2014, p. 1114–1135; Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I. The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1991, p. 478.
- 30 Sadegh Shajari, *Chain Reaction and Chaos. Toward Modern Persia*, New York, University Press of America, 2015, p. 65.
- 31 Alvin J. Cottrel, 'Iran's Armed Forces under the Pahlavi Dynasty', in *Iran Under The Pahlavis*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1978, p. 428.

- 32 For a critical approach of Iranian nuclear ambitions under the Shah as ‘unrealistic’, see Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani, ‘Iran’s Nuclear Programme Revisited’, *Energy Policy*, September 1980, p. 189.
- 33 This did not prevent Washington from considering selling eight nuclear reactors to Iran in 1976. Likewise, there were no criticisms of the economic rationality of the Iranian nuclear program in the 1970s. Voir Alvin J. Cottrel, *op. cit.*
- 34 Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *op. cit.*
- 35 See ‘L’Iran ne veut pas la bombe’, in *Chroniques de l’histoire. Le Chah d’Iran*, Bassillac, Hachette, 1998, p. 117.
- 36 The Bushehr power plant (two 1230 megawatt reactors) built by the German company KWU was completed at 60 to 85%, according to different sources, at the time of the Revolution. Personal interview with Sadegh Shajari, Paris, 7 February 2020.
- 37 Personal interview with a former French diplomat based in Iran at the end of the 1970s, Paris, November 2019.
- 38 Denis Bauchard, *op. cit.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Robert Graham, *Iran. The Illusion of Power*, London, Routledge, 1978, p. 98.
- 41 See Claude Angeli, Stéphanie Mesnier, *Notre allié Saddam*, Paris, Olivier Orban, 1992.
- 42 See the letter of engagement of a new Iran analyst at the French ministry of Defence in 1991. The idea was that Paris went too far in supporting Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1980s. Personal interview with a former Middle East analysis of the French Ministry of Defence, Paris, November 2020.
- 43 On Total’s projects and investments in South Pars 2 and 3, see Clément Therme, ‘L’Iran exportateur de gaz?’, *Note de l’Ifri*, March 2008. Available: https://inis.iaea.org/collec tion/NCLCollectionStore/_Public/42/052/42052706.pdf (Last access, 24 January 2021).
- 44 See Matthieu Perrier, *L’autonomie relative des firmes transnationales françaises vis-a-vis de la diplomatie de l’Etat français : le cas du marché iranien depuis 2006*, unpublished MA dissertation, Institut d’études politiques de Paris, 2019.
- 45 They were 40 business meetings between French and Iranian partners between 2015 and 2016 organised by the MEDEF (usually the number of business meetings for each Middle Eastern country is two per year). Personal interview with a MEDEF representative, Paris, 27 September 2018.
- 46 In 1974 a US Special National Intelligence Estimates mentions the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb before the mid-1980s under certain circumstances. See Special National Intelligence Estimate 4-1-74, ‘Prospects for Further Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons’, 23 August 1974, Top Secret, Excised Copy. 9. Available: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB240/snief.pdf> (Last access, 1 November 2022).
- 47 Anthony Cordesman and Khalid Al-Rodhan, *Iran’s Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Real and Potential Threat*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., 2006, pp. 210–213.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 See National Intelligence Estimate, Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities, November 2007. Available: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203_release.pdf (Last access, 21 December 2020).
- 50 Benoît Pelopidas, ‘Conclusion. Dépasser le panglossisme nucléaire’, in *Repenser les Stratégies Nucléaires. Continuités et Ruptures. Un hommage à Lucien Poirier*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2019, p. 448.
- 51 Isabelle Lassere, ‘Nucléaire: le retour de la prolifération menace l’équilibre du monde’, Paris, *Le Figaro*, 29 May 2020.

- 52 For an articulation between the ‘proliferation paradigm’ and a diagnosis of its shortcomings, see Benoît Pelopidas, ‘The oracles of proliferation. How Experts Maintain a Biased Historical Reading that Limits Policy Innovation’, *Non-proliferation Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, March 2011, pp. 297–314.
- 53 Malcom M. Craig, ‘The “Islamic Bomb”: Perceptions of Middle Eastern Nuclear Proliferation, 1979–1989’, Oxford, *Diplomatic History*, June 2020, p. 28.
- 54 Hugh Gusterson, ‘Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Feb., 1999), pp. 111.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 56 ‘Iran will not accept nuclear apartheid: Official’, *Press TV*, 15 May 2014. Available: <https://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/05/15/iran-will-not-accept-nuclear-apartheid-official/> (Last access, 21 December 2020).
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 For publications within the official ideological framework, see : Bruno Tertrais, *Iran. La prochaine guerre*, Paris, Cherche midi, 2007 ; Thérèse Delpech, *Le grand perturbateur*, Paris, Grasset, 2007 ; François Heisbourg, *Iran, le choix des armes ?*, Paris, Stock, 2007 ; Marie-Hélène Labbé, *La quête nucléaire de l’Iran*, Paris, Sorbonne Université Presses, 2020.
- 59 Hugh Gusterson, *op. cit.*, p. 115. See also Kjølvs Egeland, ‘The ideology of nuclear order’, *New Political Science* (forthcoming).
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 61 Personal interview with a French diplomats outlining the similar economic rationality between the two nuclear programmes. For instance the idea of being able to use nuclear technology in order to access the most advanced level of knowledge in other technological fields namely the automotive sector, medical research etc. Personal interview with a French diplomat (business adviser), Tehran, 2008.
- 62 Ali Khamenei, ‘US, Europe, gave Saddam WMD, have no right meddle in our missile program’, Official website, 18 October 2017. Available: <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5222/US-Europe-gave-Saddam-WMD-have-no-right-meddle-in-our-missile> (Last access, 16 December 2020).
- 63 Ity Abraham, ‘“Who’s Next?” Nuclear Ambivalence and the Contradictions of Non-Proliferation Policy’, Mumbai, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, n°43, October 2010, p. 48–56.
- 64 <https://www.alternatives-economiques.fr/1974-plan-messmer-choisit-loption-nucleaire/00067465>.
- 65 See ‘Krasner’s discussion with leading French strategists on Iran’, *Wikileaks*, 20 December 2006. Available: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PARIS7847_a.html (Last access, 26 August 2020).
- 66 Malcom M. Craig, *op. cit.* For example Laurent Fabius explains that ‘Iran is not Japan’ and therefore cannot become a nuclear threshold state. See Laurent Fabius, 37 *Quai d’Orsay*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- 67 See ‘Krasner’s discussion with leading French strategists on Iran’, *Wikileaks*, *op. cit.*
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Philippe Errera, ‘La crise nucléaire iranienne’, Paris, *AFRI*, Vol. VI, 2005, p. 704. Available: https://www.afri-ct.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/07/afri2005_errera.pdf.
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- 71 Even John Bolton recognises that under the Trump Administration ‘maximum pressure’ policy, ‘there was a legitimate concern that action against Iran could increase the risk to US forces in Iraq and across the region’. See John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened. A White House Memoir*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. p. 329.
- 72 See his interview with Alain Barluet, ‘Nicolas Roche: “La dissuasion nucléaire retrouve toute sa place”’, Paris, *Le Figaro*, 23 January 2017. Nicolas Roche, *Pourquoi la dissuasion*, Paris: PUF, 2017, p. 338 and p. 362 = .
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 360.
- 74 Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy. Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 177.
- 75 This EU role consists in the ‘European’s decision to ban Iran from the SWIFT banking system’ and the implementation of an EU oil embargo against the Islamic Republic. For an analysis insisting on this factor, see Matthew Kroenig, ‘The Return to the Pressure Track: The Trump Administration and the Iran Nuclear Deal’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 29:1, 2018, p. 100.
- 76 See his biography on the website of Grasset : <https://www.grasset.fr/auteurs/gerard-araud>.
- 77 Gérard Araud, ‘Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l’Iran’, Paris, *Les Carnets du CAPS*, n° 22, janvier 2016.
- 78 Laurent Fabius explains that the Iranian diplomats ‘thought that to negotiate with the US means to negotiate with the P5 + 1. We cannot have two different negotiation process’. See Laurent Fabius, *37 Quai d’Orsay, op. cit.*, p. 67.
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- 80 Personal interview with Stanislas de Laboulaye, Paris, April 2019.
- 81 Wendy R. Sherman explains that Laurent Fabius has been seeking ‘revenge’ two weeks later after the revelation of the secret back-channel in Geneva mentioning his refusal of a ‘sucker’s deal’. See Wendy R. Sherman, *Not for the faint of heart, op. cit.*, pp. 67–69.
- 82 See Pierre Haski, ‘Pourquoi Laurent Fabius a torpillé l’accord de Genève avec l’Iran’, *L’Obs*, 10 November 2013. Available : <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-monde/20131110.RUE0085/pourquoi-laurent-fabius-a-torpille-l-accord-de-geneve-avec-l-iran.html> (Last access, 21 December 2020).
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- 89 Gérard Araud, 'Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran', *op. cit.*
- 90 Gérard Araud, 'Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran', *op. cit.*
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- 92 Laura Rozen, 'Inside the secret US-Iran diplomacy that sealed nuke deal', *Al-Monitor*, 11 August 2015. Available: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html> (Last access, 24 January 2021).
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- 112 This can be seen during the period 2005–2007 by the marginalisation of the diplomats of the ANMO office for the benefit of the Direction of Strategic Affairs of the Quai of Orsay on the Iranian issue which becomes essentially 'nuclear'. See Flavien Bourrat, *op.cit.*
- 113 Even if, according to John Bolton, there is a 'bureaucratic inertia' and an 'immense power of a dug-in bureaucracy' in the US while dealing with the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. See John Bolton, *op. cit.*, p. 72 and p. 28.
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