

# I-POST

## Quarterly

### IPCS PROGRAM ON SUICIDE TERRORISM

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Suicide bombing, it appears, goes hand in hand with the quest of acquiring the all powerful nuclear bomb. In mid-April 2006, Iran announced publicly that it had established an entire force of some 40,000 suicide bombers in response to threats of military strikes from the US and the West. Iran, has in effect, 'legalized' suicide bombing as a state strategy, complete with proper registration forms for Iranian volunteers for martyrdom missions, with personal choices whether the individual wished to attack targets in Israel or the US.<sup>1</sup>



Iranian women dressed as suicide bombers during a demonstration in Teheran, July 31, 2006. (Source: Tom Gross, Mideast Media Analysis. <http://www.tomgrossmedia.com/Hizbullahiran.html>)

This force, named the Special Unit of Martyrdom Seekers in the Revolutionary Guards, was revealed when members marched in a military parade, with explosive packs around their waists and detonators held high.<sup>2</sup>

The display and subsequent media reporting of military formations of suicide bombers clearly had a political purpose. It demonstrated the belief in the effectiveness of the suicide bomber in hitting back at strong states like the US, and the coming of age of suicide terrorism as a modern military and political weapon.

Despite the fact that the military calculus clearly favoured the US and the West in conventional wars, the former has hesitated in

taking full-scale military action against Iran, popularly perceived as a nuclear threat. The Bush Administration's attempts at subtle threats – such as “not leaving out the military option against Iran,” a euphemism for war – have been largely dismissed as political posturing. Indeed, there are experts who even advise against it, citing the debacle in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

Thus far, the policy against Iran's nuclear ambitions has been limited to diplomacy. Tehran, however, understands the psychology of the West's manipulations of international politics, of employing bluster as political showmanship, and has not yielded an inch in negotiations since

late 2003, when it was first detected that Iran had nuclear facilities. Clearly, diplomatic negotiations, unless backed up by force, do not work in the nuclear issue context.

### IMPLICATIONS OF A NUCLEAR IRAN

Despite the controversial argument of the “clash of civilizations” between the West and the Islamic world being repeatedly criticized, international events that took place since September 11 have hardly endeared the US, and the West in general, in the eyes of Muslims worldwide. First, the Iraq war has directly or indirectly caused the deaths of 30,000 to 100,000 Iraqis. The ongoing insurgency, social instability and the failure to create any semblance of a unified, progressive and peaceful Iraq, remains a

<sup>1</sup> “US planned campaign against Iran before Iraq War,” *Today*, 17 April 2006

<sup>2</sup> “Iran suicide bombers ready to strike,” *The Straits Times* 17 April 2006

<sup>3</sup> “US tries to dampen talk of Iran Strike,” *Associated Press* 10 April 2006 “U.S. may launch strike on Iran,” *Today* 10 April 2006

blemish on America's international reputation. Each day of terrorist violence in Iraq is testament to the monumental mistakes of the Bush Administration's policies in Iraq since March 2003.

Secondly, the Bush Administration's foreign policy in Palestine, with its cutting of aid to the Hamas-dominated Palestinian government in favour of President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction may well lead to more economic hardship for the Palestinian people in the future. In view of Hamas' political and military success in seizing control of the Gaza strip from Fatah's hands in mid-June, the Fatah-biased US foreign policy could well provide political oxygen for Hamas and the Palestinians to throw in their lot more firmly with Iran in a bid for survival. There will be no lack of volunteers for suicide bombers then.

The eventual development of nuclear power in Iran, along with a failure of the international community to act, may provide a safe haven for anti-West and anti-US elements that operate with impunity. This may well include the al Qaeda network led by Osama bin Laden, remnants of the Taliban waging an insurgency in Afghanistan and other Iranian supported groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In spite of all the visible signs of antagonism towards the US and the West, it may be deduced that Tehran does not desire, nor is it totally prepared for, a large scale war reminiscent of the Iraq war launched in 2003. Otherwise, contrary to all military (and political) sense, Tehran would not have put on a visible show of strength by staging a military parade of suicide bombers. This spectacle, like the logic of doggedly pursuing a nuclear program in spite of international opposition, was meant to deter Iran's perceived enemies.

Iran does not relish the fate of its neighbour, and it is logical that the Iranian Islamic regime does its best to avoid a war with the West, while simultaneously attempting to obtain insurance against external threats towards its state sovereignty.

Given that, at present, there is no effective measure, tactic or technological innovation that can eliminate or prevent suicide bombing, states are relying on the more ambiguous and less tangible policy of 'indirect measures' (or the 'soft' approach), in fighting suicide terrorism. Concerned states are addressing the issue of Islamic extremism by emphasizing education to combat radicalism, and by relying on inter-state diplomacy rather than on direct military measures alone.

The 'indirect measures' strategy against the dual threats of suicide terrorism and nuclear arms in the hands of 'hostile' states like Iran, is in reality, merely a short-term policy for the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. In order to eradicate these threats completely, it is necessary to acknowledge the inevitability of Iranian power in the Middle East, and then reach out by means of economic engagement, such as foreign direct investment, trade links and other economic ties. By bringing Iran into the fold of the world market, its people and regime would have national and economic interests to consider instead of devoting resources to suicide bombers and building nuclear arms.

Only through the process of winning over the hearts of the Iranians, can the nuclear threat posed by Tehran ultimately be curbed. Meanwhile, unless there is a technological breakthrough in effectively identifying, detecting and preventing suicide bombers from operating, the threat of suicide bombing will remain for many years to come.

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