

Culture, Religion and Strategy: The 'Islamic' Contours of Iran's Nuclear Thinking

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Abstract

This article proposes a fresh explanation of Iran's nuclear programme by using the framework of strategic culture. The core argument of this article is that Iran's strategic restraint in not overtly weaponising its nuclear programme is primarily driven by its strategic culture despite the continuously deteriorating regional security situation and a deeply hostile neighbourhood. This has incentivised a 'Shia way' of looking at and practising a strategy that sees nuclear weapons as fundamentally un-Islamic. Instead of weaponisation, Iran has shown remarkable flexibility to accept restrictions on its nuclear programme under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Security-based realist explanations fail to account for such behaviour and can be better explained using a cultural framework. The strategic culture-based framework also explains the reasons behind Iran's policy of nuclear hedging and its acceptability by major sections of the political elite in Iran.

Keywords: Iran's nuclear strategy, nuclear weapons, strategic culture, Shia identity, Persian nationalism

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