



# SECURITY FOR ALL OR FOR NONE

*By Sean David Hobbs*

*Iranian foreign policy guru Seyed Hossein Mousavian discusses nuclear weaponization and the need for a multilateral security network in the Middle East*

**L**eading Iranian diplomat and analyst Seyed Hossein Mousavian, 62, has served in a variety of diplomatic capacities, many of which were connected to Iran's nuclear dossier. As a prominent international voice, many of Mousavian's views are studied as an indicator of widely held views in Tehran, especially on the topic of nuclear weaponization.

Since 2009, Mousavian has served as a Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy specialist at the Program on Science and Global Security in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. His views and speeches are closely watched by American and Middle Eastern pundits and policymakers.

He supports the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as well as an Islamic fatwa against nuclear weapons. Yet, given zero achievement of adherence to NPT over the past fifty years, Mousavian believes that only when Muslim-majority powers' (such as Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) pursue weaponization and the nuclear bomb will Israel and the United States come to the table and negotiate in good faith an end to all WMDs in the Middle East.

*Cairo Review Senior Editor Sean David Hobbs spoke with Mousavian in mid-September 2019.*



**CR:** *What was the general state of mind during negotiations for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2014, as opposed to where we're at now, five years later?*

**SHM:** I think some points are clear for the international community. Iran and Egypt both initiated a nuclear weapons-free zone [in the Middle East] in the 1970s. Since then, there has been zero progress on a realization of the United Nations Security Council's calls for a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. Therefore, we can say about forty to fifty years of international efforts for a nuclear weapons-free zone have totally failed. Zero progress. We have had many UN resolutions, many international conferences, and all have failed. And there is only one reason.

The reason for this failure is that Israel

has nuclear bombs, and is neither ready to join the 1970 United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, nor give up the nuclear weapons that it presently possesses. As such, international powers have a complete double standard toward Muslim-majority nations in the Middle East compared to Israel. The international community does everything to prevent Muslim countries from even having enrichment, while the United States and others work behind the scenes to support Israel having more weapons of mass destruction. This double standard is clear and the reason why we failed in the past, in 2014, and today.

△ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Abu Dhabi, 2014. Photograph by the Emirates Policy Center

**CR:** *What about charges that Iran had broken international regulations and agreements on nuclear weaponization?*

**SHM:** Iran is the most inspected country in the history of non-proliferation. Iran accepted in 2013 and 2015 the JCPOA, the most comprehensive agreement ever with the highest level of inspections, the most limits, which no other NPT member ever accepted.

Nevertheless, the United States and Israel continue to blame Iran, and they have greeted Iranian transparency and acceptance of the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] inspections with the most comprehensive sanctions ever. This is the reality.

Yet, nobody is talking about the Israeli bomb. They're talking about Iran, which is a member of the NPT and does not have a nuclear bomb. Israel has nuclear weapons and is not a member of the NPT, and the Israelis have not let the IAEA into their country for even one inspection. Meanwhile, Iran has had over thirty thousand man hours of IAEA inspections in the last fifteen years.

So clearly there is a double standard which global superpowers exercise when it comes to the Iranian nuclear dossier in particular and nuclear weaponization in the Middle East in general, which is all in violation of the UN Security Council's resolutions. Now, we—people from Muslim-majority nations—have two options moving forward. Either we have weapons of mass destruction [WMDs] or a WMD-free zone for every country in the region. This WMD and nuclear-free zone option has, as I said before, failed for the past fifty years and it will fail again for the next, unless we Muslim-majority nations do something different. It is clear. Only if Muslim powers such as

Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and so on weaponize and get the nuclear bomb will Israel and the United States come to the table and negotiate in good faith an end to all WMDs in the Middle East. This is the only way the Israelis and the Americans will take our side seriously and the only way we will get a weapons-free zone—a nuclear-free zone—in the region. As long as we are going to just sit and watch their policies, their double-standard policies, nothing will happen.

I don't want this option, mind you. I have been advocating a nuclear weapons-free zone and WMD-free zone in the Middle East and the world for thirty years of my life. I have written copious articles on this subject and my next book on Middle East freedom from WMDs is going to be published by Brookings and Chatham House in November 2019. Therefore, I'm a strong supporter of an WMD and nuclear weapons-free zone.

**CR:** *Is there a consensus among powers in the region that they must seek nuclear weaponization in order to bring the Israelis and Americans to the negotiating table?*

**SHM:** No, no. The official policy in Iran, for example, is against this idea. The leadership in Iran is more committed to banning all weapons of mass destruction due to the Islamic fatwa against WMDs and nuclear weapons. Therefore, even if Iran withdraws from the NPT, even if Iran withdraws from JCPOA, Iran is not going to build a nuclear bomb.

However, what happens after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's rule is something that I don't know. The Shah

was after nuclear weapons. If Iran is going to have a secular system, those new leaders would certainly pursue nuclear weaponization. But as long as the Iranian government is ruled by religious leaders—since they are more committed to the principles of Islam—they will disdain the use of the bomb. The best example of this is when former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein used weapons of mass destruction against Iranian forces during the Iran–Iraq War. One hundred thousand Iranians were either killed or injured from these WMD attacks, and when the then-minister of defense went to the late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini asking for permission to retaliate in kind, that is use WMDs against the Iraqis, Khomeini said Iranian forces could not retaliate in the same fashion because using weapons of mass destruction is haram. It’s genocide. Innocent people will be killed. So, you see that even in the midst of a brutal war, the Iranian leadership will not support nuclear weaponization.

*CR: What about Turkey? The Turks seem to share some traits with the Iranians. They are non-Arabs in the Middle East and some whisper that the Turks already have nuclear weapons.*

**SHM:** I don’t know if Turkey has nuclear weapons but I do know that Turkey is different. Turkey is a member of NATO, has relations with Israel, has relations with the United States; all the while, Turkey is no puppet. That’s why the Turks are independent and are buying the S-400 missile defense system from Russia. They buy American fighter jets and Russian fighter jets. Turkey is a huge nation with history, civilization,

and human resources. They were once an empire, and they want to be a powerful country, an independent country.

However, the other countries in the Persian Gulf like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] want to borrow security from the United States, and their security today is ruled by the United States. President Trump said that these nations would collapse if the Americans didn’t prop them up. Yet, Trump could never have said the same about Turkey or Iran or Egypt.

*CR: Why is it that Turkey and Iran are naturally opposed to American influence in the region, while other Arab states are more accepting of U.S. influence?*

**SHM:** I mean there are many reasons, certainly, we can write a book on this topic that is three thousand pages long. One big reason is that countries like Turkey and Iran and Egypt are established states with long histories and great human resource potential. Egypt is different than some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. Some of these Persian Gulf nations are so new, they are younger than I am.

Yet, Qatar is somehow different than the rest of its Arab neighbors. The Qataris have a young nation, it is true, but like Iran and Turkey, the Qataris are looking for independence from Saudi Arabia, and do not like to bow to influence from their neighbors. Also, in Qatar, the leadership believes in a regional cooperation mechanism, that the regional countries can maintain their own peace and stability. But Saudi Arabia and the GCC do not have popular support and are not

modern nation-states. Their entire ruling system is tribunal.

*CR: Why is there this two-faced approach by the United States and other powers to the Middle East region?*

**SHM:** I believe countries like the United States prefer to sell to these oil-rich countries hundreds of billions of dollars of arms, so they want to maintain the status quo. President Trump, you remember, signed \$300-400 billion in arms to the Saudis. Trump and his officials don't care whether these weapons are used against Yemenis. They have a short-sighted vision. If the United States would have invested in a regional cooperation system to bring peace and stability, then all Middle Eastern countries would have good relations with Europe and the United States.

*CR: But Obama was different, wasn't he?*

**SHM:** Obama was different. He represented something new. Obama changed zero enrichment of uranium to zero nuclear bomb building as a condition for negotiations with Iran on the nuclear file. That meant that Iran was allowed to enrich uranium but not move toward building a nuclear bomb. If Obama's narrative here would have been extended to every country in this region, he would be able to make nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

*CR: Why was Obama given this opportunity within the American political system to change the narrative of the United States' relationship with Iran?*

**SHM:** We have two different schools of thought in terms of foreign policy coming from the United States. One school is made up of warmongers like John Bolton, and one school of thought is multilateral, with thinkers like Obama and John Kerry. The Obama/Kerry approach to engagement is through regional cooperation. The Obama/Kerry school of thought wants peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Meanwhile, the Trump/Bolton approach is to withdraw from international conventions and to kill previous agreements such as the JCPOA.

*CR: Was this change in outlook from the Obama/Kerry school of foreign policy based on American losses in the Iraq war?*

**SHM:** No, the United States has lost every war it has fought since the Second World War. So now the leadership in America and the American people are saying enough is enough. Americans lost in Afghanistan; they lost in Iraq; they lost in Yemen; they lost in Vietnam and Korea, every war. Except for that one, small island.

*CR: Grenada.*

**SHM:** Yes, little Grenada in 1983. This is the only achievement, the only successful American war, since 1945. Look at occupied Afghanistan. Seventeen years, tens of thousands of American troops, and after seventeen years, the Taliban has the upper hand; they have occupied over 50 percent of Afghanistan, and the United States is crying to the Taliban, "please let us go; give us a safe exit," that's it.

That's why I believe now a majority of Republicans and Democrats and an overwhelming majority of the American public understands that the United States should not create another war and should not be engaged in another war. Obama understood, first of all, that unilateralism doesn't work, and he opted for the multilateral approach to manage international issues. Second, his strategy was to avoid a new war in the Middle East at all costs.

*CR: Regarding the recent attacks against Saudi ARAMCO, what do you think about the conflict now between the Saudis, the GCC, Yemen, and Iran?*

**SHM:** I think this present conflict is proof of the necessity of finding common principles to resolve the crises in the region. The reality is that we will either have security for every country, or for no country. Therefore, if the Saudis and the GCC are going to upset Iranian interests and security in the region, they should expect that they will not be able to enjoy

security. Security must be for all nations.

I mean, it is not only about Iran. We have already experienced the Afghanistan war, from which you have seen a huge, negative impact on the security of the region. We have seen Iraq and the Yemen war. The Yemen war now is becoming completely counterproductive for the Saudis. We should work for and be convinced of security for everyone. This is the principle we should invest in.

*CR: Do you have a final vision for the future?*

**SHM:** The United States will eventually leave the region as American power and interest ebb. Other superpowers are, even now, trying to fill the gap left by a less-active United States. Yet, the region cannot be dominated anymore by outside powers. That is why we local nations need to think about the sustainable solution, which is a regional cooperation security system in the Persian Gulf and the rest of the Middle East.