

Hiroshima, Iran, and the Future of Nuclear Weapons

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For 20 months, the Obama administration led a consortium of the nuclear armed permanent members of the UN Security Council—Russia, China, the UK and France—plus Germany in negotiations with Iran over the country's nuclear program. In the deal that was signed this July, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran agreed to dismantle two thirds of its nuclear centrifuges, cut its stockpile of uranium by more than 98%, and give international inspectors regular access to all its nuclear facilities.

Critics of the agreement argue that some of its provisions expire after ten years, that there are gaps in the inspections regime, and that the lifting of economic sanctions—which Iran gets in exchange for compliance with the agreement—will free up \$100 billion dollars, money that can be used in part to advance Tehran's foreign policy agenda.

Now, there is an elephant in the room that neither critics nor most supporters of the Iran agreement are willing to acknowledge. The elephant is the double standard involved in the world's leading nuclear powers insisting on non-proliferation even as they cling in perpetuity to their own monopoly of the ultimate weapons of mass destruction and

terror. Related to this is the remarkable silence in the West about Israel's nuclear arsenal.

While American pundits and journalists have managed to ignore this elephant, it has not escaped notice in Iran or indeed in the rest of the world's other non-nuclear states. On the occasion of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference this spring, Tehran called for a timetable for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, which is in fact a legal obligation of the United States and the other nuclear-armed signatories to the treaty. In July, a couple of weeks after the Comprehensive Joint Plan was signed in Vienna, Iran again called for the abolition of nuclear weapons, including in Israel.

It is not obvious why Russia, China, and the West are clinging to their nuclear weapons. While the weapons in theory serve as a military trump card, enabling their possessors to bully non-nuclear states, such threats have little credibility and are probably ineffective. Nor are nuclear weapons needed as a deterrent to prevent Iran or any other country from acquiring nuclear weapons; conventional military capabilities are sufficiently devastating for that purpose.

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Why, then, are political leaders and a significant segment of the populations in nuclear armed states unwilling to relinquish such militarily superfluous weapons? The irrationality of such attitudes 70 years after Hiroshima cries out for psychological analysis. I see three major factors at issue.

First, nuclear weapons are more than military power on steroids. They also represent the ultimate power of the universe itself—the awesome destructiveness unleashed when matter is converted to energy. As such, nuclear weapons are objects of worship, a phenomenon Robert Jay Lifton called nuclearism.

Second, as the most extreme special case of military power, nuclear weapons uphold the irrational worldview of those who idealize the militarist state. In my own research in political psychology, I found that hawk beliefs are strongly correlated with authoritarianism, which suggests origins in punitive parental introjects. In this complex, the militarist state serves as a surrogate for the idealized punitive parent. In addition, I found that for most male hawks, military power appears to uphold a macho self-image, which is a psychological factor distinct from authoritarianism.

Third, nuclear weapons play into an even more primitive complex, identification with the good object of infancy and the splitting off and projection of the bad object, a level of the psyche explored by Melanie Klein. This may underpin the apocalyptic fantasies of many that “we” can be trusted with these weapons because “we” are Good, while “they” (in this

case the Iranians) must be denied these weapons at all costs because “they” are Evil.

Here, the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is an essential corrective. In fact, the US is the only state that has ever used these heinous weapons, and historical research calls into question the benign purpose Truman gave for incinerating tens of thousands of civilians. As Richard Falk has said, if the Bomb had been developed first by the Nazis and used to annihilate European cities, nuclear weapons today would occupy a position alongside Auschwitz in the Western moral imagination.

In an imperfect world, the Iran nuclear deal is an important next step for advancing international security. In order to counteract the toxic complexes being mobilized against the agreement, progressives and moderates need to reframe the debate using psycho-historical insights and bold policy alternatives that will further enhance the security of Israel and all states in the Middle East.

Instead of pouring more weapons into the region, the great powers that negotiated the Iran deal need to bring all states in the Middle East and North Africa to a comprehensive peace conference and use every carrot and stick at their disposal to craft demilitarized security arrangements. That, in my view, is what peace-loving people throughout the world should be demanding.

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