Realism on the Iranian-Israeli Nuclear Rivalry

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Abstract. Issues related to nuclear weapons have always the attracted international attention. In the Middle East, there are two countries that are very aggressively developing nuclear technology and allegedly heading towards the development of nuclear weapons, namely Iran and Israel. Both countries have been enemies to each other. Nuclear weapons can also serve as a security guarantor and a negotiation tool of a state. However, there is a commonly accepted adage that if a country is attempting to strengthen itself, it will stir insecurity and anxiety from other countries. This creates a situation called security dilemma, a concept often interconnected with the realist view of the international relations studies. In this paper, the authors will discuss the relationship between nuclear competition between Iran and Israel from the point of view of realism, especially in regard to security dilemma concept. This can also be associated with nuclear development by a country which can cause anxiety and concern for other countries, especially those considered as enemies.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, nuclear weapons, security dilemma, realism.

1 Introduction

1.1. Background

Issues related to nuclear weapons have always the attracted international attention. In the Middle East, there are two countries that are very aggressively developing nuclear technology and allegedly heading towards the development of nuclear weapons, namely Iran and Israel. With the nuclear development, it is hoped that it will become an additional military force and the security 'guarantee' of these countries.

Israel has allegedly developed its nuclear program since the late 1940s, and was first discovered by the US in 1960 (1). However, until now, it is not clear whether Israel has nuclear weapons or not because the government has neither denied nor confirmed it. By having nuclear weapons, Israel will face a big challenge because the effects of these nuclear weapons are enormous and can no longer be tolerated, especially by its adversaries. Israel's first and largest nuclear power plant was located in the Al-Naqb desert, in the southern of Jerusalem. The background of Israel's nuclear development is not known for certain, but scientists have been involved since the establishment of the Zionist movement. The vulnerable

geographical position may be one of the factors that has triggered Israel to acquire nuclear weapons. Geographically, Israel is located among its neighbouring Arab countries that have been hostile to the Israelis so that they have become a security threat to the Israelis. Israel began to set its strategic goals to cover its weaknesses at the lowest possible cost and achieve the highest national interest. Israel's strategic goal is military superiority. Israel strives so that its military can be formidable so that it can secure its national security even though if it has to put aside its economic situation. The possession of nuclear weapons is a preventive measure for Israel in dealing with its adversaries and as a political tool to pressure its opponents in negotiations.

Iran has developed its nuclear technology since 1957 by signing a cooperation agreement with the US and building its first nuclear facility in 1967 (2). However, after the 1979 Revolution, the new Iranian regime canceled the nuclear cooperation made by the previous regime. This made Iran isolated so that it continued to develop its own nuclear technology alone and got various international sanctions. Even though Iran has not directly developed nuclear weapons, but it has the capability to acquire one if it wants to. This can be seen in 2002, when Iran was able to develop its own nuclear enrichment program, which surprised Western countries such as the US (2).

Several countries, such as the United States, Germany, France, and Britain, have opposed Iran's nuclear project. According to them, the nuclear project can disrupt security stability in the Middle East. It cannot be denied that every country really wants a strong security to protect themselves. As stated by Morgenthau and Thompson (3), national power is very important in keeping the state of the country always stable. One of the reasons why Iran is concerned with its security and national power can be seen by looking at the Iranians neighbours, such as Afghanistan and Iraq that were invaded by a military and political power greater than Iran. This also triggered Iran to increase its security by having nuclear weapons. Chubin and Litwak (4) stated that Iran's nuclear ownership was driven by the existence of two nuclear powers, Israel and Pakistan, as well as the growing influence of the United States in the Middle East after Iraq and Afghanistan lost the war. Therefore, Iran feels the need to prepare itself by increasing its security through nuclear possession to face threats to its security. Iran's biggest threats are undoubtedly Israel and the United States.

Prior to the deteriorating of Iran and Israel relations, relations between the two were not so complicated. The relations between the two began after Israel gained its independence, where the Iranians and the Israelis started their relations for economic and strategic reasons. Iran was also a former exporter of Israeli oil and the largest importer of Israeli weapons. On the other hand, Israel also had a diplomatic mission in Tehran. Previously, their relationship in 1948 to 1978 went well. However, in 1979, after the overthrow of the monarchy, Israel was labelled by Iran's new theocratic regime "Little Satan" and "Big Satan", so was the United States. Later on, Iran switched to supporting Palestine over Israel. Since then, relations between Iran and Israel have been heating up as the years have gone by. Moreover, when Iran has a nuclear project, there is always opposition from the Israelis with the aim of undermining Iran's nuclear development. New tensions re-emerged in February 2020, because Israel interfered with Tehran's interests in the Middle East especially Syria. Thus, Iran threatened to destroy Israel. However, Israel actually gave an attack through its warplanes and killed 12 people. The Israeli-Iranian showdown continued in November 2020, with the Israelis refusing to comment when it was accused of the murder of an Iranian nuclear scientist who was also the head of the

Defense Ministry's Research and Innovation Organization. Therefore, the relationship between Iran and Israel until now has not improved and is getting hotter.

In this paper, the authors want to discuss the relationship between nuclear competition between Iran and Israel from the point of view of realism, especially in regard to security dilemma concept. The concepts explains that if a country strengthens itself, it will cause anxiety for other countries. This can also be associated with nuclear development by a country which can cause anxiety and concern for other countries, especially those considered as enemies.

1.2 Research Problems

1. How does realism view Iran and Israel as security rivals?
2. What is the relationship between the concept of security dilemma and the nuclear development of Iran and Israel?

2 Theoretical Framework

Realism is one of the most common approaches to understanding international relations and is often used as the basis of many foreign policies. This approach places itself in opposition to "utopianism" or "idealism". The view of realism more or less promotes etatism that sees a state as the pre-eminent or primary actor and tends to see all other actions in world politics as less significant. Realists assume that the main goal of all countries is closely related to survival, while all other goals such as the economy are secondary (High Politics vs. Low Politics). Realists are also inclined to view that there are no state or other institutions that can be relied on to ensure its survival. This is because the structure of the system does not allow the formation of friendship and trust, where there is only insecurity resulting from anarchy.

In anarchy, states have a strong tendency to beat, overthrow, and threaten each other. As a state entity, it certainly has goals and interests that underlie the establishment of the country and become a reference in taking steps in an anarchic international structure. Realists view this as an appropriate condition in the international structure so that anarchy in the international system encourages countries in the world to go through a certain mechanism process in which the conditions of each country can be safe from threats to each other. Anarchy in the international structure is developing to become increasingly complex along with the development of civilization, science, technology, and global connectivity which increasingly pave the way for countries to show their power in order to achieve strategic goals and interests that risk threatening other countries.

Realists have a perspective that sees the world in 3 characteristics: egoistic, group and power-centric. Egoistic means that every step taken by an actor in the dynamics of the international structure is based on self-interest, which does not know whether it will have a bad influence on other actors—a good influence on other actors is only added value, not the main focus of the actor. Grouping means that the cohesion generated by group solidarity is important in maintaining international political security and stability. Power-centric means that material power is a key element of every actor, this is a natural construction that arises from human

civilization which classifies one another based on material strength. This is also reflected in the dynamics of countries in the international structure (5).

This anarchic condition needs to be neutralized with a situation where no one country outperforms another in terms of power in order to achieve a stable and peaceful condition. It is necessary to have a situation where the powers of the states in an anarchic international structure are in a balanced position. This perspective gave rise to the theory of balance of power (6). The state should try to strengthen itself either by cooperating with big countries or strengthening and enlarging military power.

The dynamics of mutually reinforcing the self-security of each country does not always run without obstacles because security is something relative. Security for one country, means a threat to other countries (or other adjacent countries). This is based on the concept that to achieve the stability and security of a country, power is needed, and power has a tendency to threaten. From this, security dilemma concept was born initiated by John Herz (7). A security dilemma is a situation in which state actors that want to strengthen their own defense are actually perceived as a threat by other countries and make other countries feel insecure (7). When the other country feels insecure, it will automatically strengthen its defenses to increase its security. And when other countries increase their security, they will reverse the threat again. The strengthening of security which is intended solely to maintain stability and security has actually turned into a threat. The authors use this concept to explain the dynamics of nuclear strengthening between Iran and Israel because this concept is able to provide an overview of the subjectivity of the meaning of 'security' itself. Security dilemma constructs its argument and perspective as a derivation of the realist thinking, but realists are unable to focus on counter-intuitive circumstances when the state tries to strengthen its defense.

The authors will also try to look at security dilemma from a neorealist perspective because neorealists are able to explain the consequences of external factors or international structures that influence the steps taken by a country. Due to the anarchic international structure, the mere presence of actors will lead to a tendency for conflict to occur (5). Neorealists provide a view on the causes of war: the international structure that is an 'ordering principle' or a regulation in international relations (8). Neorealists argue that interacting states are controlled by a governing principle, namely the principle of anarchy. For Waltz, anarchy is not just the absence of government, but also disorder and chaos (9). The result of this anarchy is that every country must be able to help itself (self-help) and this condition of anarchy has implications for state relations like billiard balls rubbing against each other and colliding with each other. According to Waltz, a self-help system is a system in which those who do not help themselves, or who do so less effectively than others, will fail to achieve prosperity, are vulnerable to harm and will suffer (9). This shows that countries are encouraged to strengthen their countries in order to be able to survive this anarchic international system, because if they don't, they will lose and become victims of the viciousness of the international system.

3 Discussion

Iran's nuclear development is chategorized in five periods, during the time of Mohammad Shahreza Pahlavi, Ayatullah Khomeini, Ali Akbar Hasmemi, Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran under the Pahlavi leadership became an ally of the United States. At that time, the United States had helped the Pahlavi to overthrow the previous leader Mossadeq. Iran and the United States had signed a nuclear cooperation agreement. This agreement was part of the United States program. Then during the leadership of Khomeini there were no significant developments in Iran's nuclear program because at that time there was a war between Iran and Iraq. During Hasmemi's leadership, the United States imposed sanctions on Iran because Iran was considered a hotbed of nuclear-related terrorism. Then many European countries were against Iran's nuclear program during Khatami's time because European countries did not believe that Iran's nuclear weapons would be used for peace. For realists, the issue of security is a very important issue. Security is a problem that concerns the existence of a state and its discussion is widely discussed, especially by neo-realists (10). Security is identical with the emergence of threats (threats).

Iran can be said as a country that has an important role in the Middle East, so the response of Middle Eastern countries varies. Iran is surrounded by countries in Asia and Europe, such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Russia, Pakistan and Iraq. The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which separates Iran from six countries. Since the Revolution in 1979, Iran has been seen as a country that has a different identity from western countries, which are predominantly liberal and secular. This view creates the assumption that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is considered dangerous. Iran also has a notorious enemy: Israel. Iran and Israel have thrown verbal and physical attacks on each other because the two countries are expanding their hegemony in the Middle East.

The strained relations between Iran and Israel became more evident after the two decided to strengthen military security with nuclear power. The provision of a special place for research on the development of nuclear weapons has also been created and established in each region of the country. The enmity between Israel and Iran is caused because the two countries have interests that must be guarded. The two countries strengthening each other's security also creates a security dilemma. Israel considers Iran's progress to threaten Israel's sovereignty, because Israel is traumatized by events in the past when the Holocaust happened to the Jews by the Nazis. So that Israel was accused of taking preventive action against Iran by killing Iranian nuclear scientists.

Israel's killing of Iranian scientists can be interpreted as a fundamental act of the principle of "preemptive strike". This attack is a military action carried out by a country in response to a perceived threat from another country. Israel considers that it will be a big threat to its country if Iran has scientists with the capability to conduct research and develop nuclear power. Therefore, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike or started the attack before the predicted threat actually occurs. In this condition, countries are again faced with a security dilemma in which the greater the power of a country will be perceived as a greater threat to other countries. In a state-centric realist point of view, the state will do anything to make itself strong, including even having to carry out attacks to stop and kill something that is felt to be threatening.

On the other hand, Iran is in a position where it is surrounded by friends of its enemy, especially the United States. One of the countries that is a friend of the United States in the Middle East is Israel, which also allegedly has nuclear capability. Iran in its nuclear development is in a disadvantaged position because it continues to receive criticism from the international community, but on the other hand, if Iran does not develop a nuclear technology, Iran will not have the tools to defend itself from other countries. Especially from Israel, which is a nuclear power country in the middle east, and also has very close relations with Iran's main enemy, the United States, that makes Iran increasingly try to have a nuclear technology for itself.

From a theoretical perspective, the two countries are in opposite positions because both countries have their own interests, especially power. In the Middle East, the two countries are in the same area and are also gaining influence in the region, both military and non-military. Then also the possession of nuclear power in the region would give them more influence in the region, which would make them have more power the others. Nuclear technology is a special technology, the technology being contested is not only able to give the country that owns great power, both militarily and economically, but also can provide security to the country that owns the technology because nuclear technology can be used as deterrence.

If a country aspires to develop or even possess nuclear technology, it is very likely that the opposition will try to develop and possess the technology as a form of balancing the power possessed by that party, and this is seen in the Middle East between Iran and Israel. This is part of the security dilemma in which if one of the two opposing parties increases their strength militarily, the opposing party will increase its strength as well, which will make the first actor increase his military strength again and this will continue to happen, but on the other hand if the actor does not increase its military strength, then the actor will not feel safe. This really applies to Israel and Iran in the Middle East.

As explained in theoretical framework, realists argue that if a state wants to maintain its security, the country must have the power that can threaten other countries. In the theoretical framework above, it has also been explained about the theory of security dilemma, which this theory can be defined as a situation where actors from a country want to strengthen their national defense (7). However, this is actually considered a threat to other countries that feel insecure, which as a result of this feeling of insecurity makes the country that feels threatened to increase its security. On the other hand, with this increase in security, the situation has reversed where the country that was the first to increase its security becomes a country that faces a threatened position. Meanwhile, from a neorealist perspective, security dilemma explains the consequences of external factors that influence a country's decision-making.

As we know, there is heightened tension between Iran and Israel regarding the nuclear development of each of these countries. Israel is thought to have been developing nuclear weapons since the late 1940s and was only discovered by the United States 20 years later, in the 1960s. However, it is not yet clear what the background and cause of Israel's creation of this nuclear weapon is. Meanwhile, in 1957, Iran signed a cooperation agreement with the United States regarding the development of nuclear technology. However, Iran canceled this cooperation in the 1979 revolution which forced Iran to develop its technology independently. Nuclear technology developed by Iran has drawn contra from many big countries because it is considered to be able to disrupt the balance and cause unrest in the Middle East.

If it is connected between the concept of the security dilemma and nuclear developments from Israel and Iran, nuclear technology developed by Iran is considered a threat to Israel because before this nuclear development, Israel and Iran had a bad relationship where Iran was initially together with the United States, then switched became pro-Palestinian rather than pro-Israel after the monarchy was overthrown. This factor is one of the causes of Israel's anxiety towards Iran, especially when Iran is developing its nuclear technology. Israel considers Iran to be the reincarnation of Germany when it was led by the Nazis. In addition, when viewed based on its geographical position, Israel has a vulnerable position where this country is located among its enemy countries. This is also one of the triggers for increasing his defense strength. Seeing the nuclear development carried out by Iran, triggered Israel to make nuclear technology so that the country feels safe. Even Israel carried out acts of premeditated murder, one of which this country succeeded in killing important experts who made and developed nuclear technology in Iran (11).

If viewed from the perspective of Iran, the result of Iran's nuclear development which was originally intended to strengthen defense is Israel's growing skepticism towards the Iranian. This skepticism is not without repercussions, because Israel has an eternal ally, the US, that is able to assist Israel at any time in the development of nuclear technology to strengthen its defense. That will actually bring a threat to Iran's security. It is a strange paradox to see that Iran's move which was originally intended to strengthen its defenses has actually turned out to be a bigger threat.

From BBC News in June 2021, the rivalry between Iran and Israel continues to this day, one of which can be seen from Israel's reaction to increasing uranium production as one of the raw materials for nuclear production by Iran. Israel gave a firm response, through Prime Minister Naftali Bennett who revealed in a cabinet meeting, that Israel asked the US and the Western Alliance to be careful of Iran's movements. The idealistic approach of the new US President Joe Biden towards Iran is also deeply regretted by Israel, and for the second time regrets America's more cooperative actions with Iran, such as when Obama granted sanctions relief on Iran in 2015. Right now, Israel doesn't want Joe Biden to repeat history of relaxing its control. Israel considers non-decisive actions will actually make Iran more confident to develop its nuclear. Responding to Israel's reaction, Iran confirmed that there is an increase in uranium production at the maximum stage, although it is still far from developing nuclear. Until now, the rivalry between Iran and Israel has not escalated to the stage of attack and material conflict, which is carried out still in the stage of a statement of resistance to their respective policies, but Iran and Israel are always on standby on the basis of concerns over security, and the security dilemma between the two countries.

4 Conclusion

The phenomenon of rivalry between Iran and Israel can be viewed using a realist perspective, both from the point of view of classical realism and neorealism. With the general assumption that the rivalry between Iran and Israel is something that occurs due to the desire of the two countries to defend each other's national security in response to a number of situations that are considered threats, and the situation that the two countries are dominant forces in the Middle

East, so that one country's efforts to increase capacity. In this case, it is in the form of developing nuclear weapons.

Nuclear development in Iran is driven by the desire to protect national security, as a country that is between countries in conflict with a region that is also very vulnerable to conflict, and the fact that Iran is not close to many countries has prompted Iran to be very careful about its security. As a confrontational country, Iran has also often got sanctions. Iran's security threat is also increased by the friendly relationship between the United States and Israel, where the United States is the dominant power that has massive intervention in the region, with many forms of intervention carrying political and economic interests. The United States also provides support for Israel's nuclear development, while on the other hand Iran is a country with strong Islamic solidarity and strongly opposes the Israeli invasion of Palestine, as well as a real rivalry in terms of dominance of influence in the Middle East.

With ideological differences and feeling that Iran's confrontational domination would jeopardize its security, Israel responded by killing Iranian scientists who played a role in nuclear production, as a form of primary strike. In addition, fear of the domination of other values that endanger security, such as the Nazi invasion in the past, pushed Israel to get involved in a proxy war with Iran. Although never reached the stage of open conflict, the rivalry between Iran and Israel can be seen from the reactions given in the statements of the two countries, verbal attacks on each other, as well as reactions to each other's policies, and the desire to always increase each other's nuclear weapons capacity.

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