

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Religious actors are often associated in a conflict, regarded as stakeholders in attempts to address or resolve a conflict. One of the approaches is through interfaith dialogue in which groups, and targeted grassroots civil societies representing other religious faiths, are gathered for conversations.¹ Interfaith engagement in conflicted zones has been documented since 1965 when Arthur Schneier and a high-ranking clergy representing Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths founded the Appeal to Conscience Foundation. It was initially created to reach out to religious leaders in conflict areas as a neutral party facilitating the dialogue to support conflict resolution.²

The United States of America (hereinafter, US) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter, Iran) embark upon multi-track peace-building through interfaith dialogue involving religious civil society groups and policy-makers. Historically, both countries have a hefty influence on religious beliefs significantly embedded in their political and social culture.² Both countries have also been conducting religious exchanges, either individually with other countries or between one another for non-nuclear discussions. For example, an interfaith dialogue involving Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim societies is a common organisational project in the US

¹Renee Garfinkel, "What Works?: Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue Programs." US Institute of Peace, 2004, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12246>.

² Ibid.

² "Religious Landscape Study", Pew Research Center, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

Many organisations, such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, and the Islamic Educational Center of Orange County, have collaborated on local interfaith dialogue projects in promoting collective understanding, mutual esteem, and kinship between American Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims for over the past decade.³ Meanwhile, in Iran, the first project of the biennial inter-religious engagement took place in Tehran in 1994, with the topic of "Muslims and Christians Serving Humans Together." This project was attended by the Chief of Cultural Center of the R.I. Iran, Abuzar Ebrahimi Torkaman, Cardinal Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, the head of the council, Hojat-of-Islam Mohammad Mahdi Taskhiri, the head of the Center for Dialogue among Faiths and Cultures, and Ayatollah Abolqassem Alidoost, an Iranian religious figure, with similar objectives in promoting inter-religious tolerance and understanding.⁴

For both countries, their friendly relations ended after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and have had no formal diplomatic relations since then. However, the US and Iran have recognised the manoeuvre of interfaith dialogue as a peace-building tool between them. For instance, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) has completed four years (between 2003 and

³ "National Catholic-Muslim Dialogue Launched, Archbishop Cupid Named Catholic Co-Chair," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2016/national-catholic-muslim-dialogue-launched-archbishop-cupich-named-catholic-co-chair>.

⁴ "Iran, Vatican Inter-Religious Dialogue Planned in Tehran," International Quran News Agency, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://iqna.ir/en/news/3469834/iran-vatican-inter-religious-dialogue-planned-in-tehran>.

2007) of the US-Iranian inter-religious delegation programs to preserve informal channels for productive engagement with Iranians, focusing on religious tolerance and freedom in promoting a peaceful relationship between the two countries particularly after the 9/11 incident.⁵ After years of meetings, ICRD has stated that Iranians are much more comfortable discussing delicate issues with Americans in a religious context, generating a more substantive and respectful outcome despite their apparent religious culture differences, and have been considering the approach for future endeavours despite having no follow-up agenda regarding the next step in continuing the dialogue until today.⁶

The relationship between the two countries is an epitome of a distrustful relationship between the Islamic world of the East and the Western culture driven by the influence of Christianity. Although no violent conflicts were induced from their ongoing relations, they have been engaged in a conflict for approximately 30 years. In the present day, the US-Iran tension on nuclear use becomes the most heated issue between the two and still shows no sign of abating. As acknowledged by the treaty on the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), both countries are engaged in nuclear enrichment programs, including power plants and weapons, and are subjects to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) verification.⁷

⁵ “US-Iranian Inter-religious Delegation (Completed Program),” International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://icrd.org/programs/asia/iran/>.

⁶ US Institute of Peace. Religion in World Affairs. David Smock. (Washington, DC: 2004), accessed September 7, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr201.pdf>.

⁷ “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),” United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>.

Nevertheless, the implications of nuclear conflict between both countries have complicated history and perceptions that should be acknowledged.

Prior to the downfall of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran, assisted by the US, initiated its nuclear program as a part of the Atoms for Peace program in the 1950s.⁸ The program continued to develop until 1974 when the Shah founded the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to build 20 nuclear power reactors, a uranium enrichment facility, and a spent fuel reprocessing plant.⁹ However, as the development of uranium enrichment prevailed, it raised concern to the international community as it might be intended for non-peaceful purposes. In November 2011, IAEA provided credible evidence that Iran has been undertaking nuclear weapons-design experiments since 2003.¹⁰ Research may have continued on a reduced scale beyond that despite being noticed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2006 for not complying with the NPT.¹¹ Not until 2020 that IAEA instituted another investigation into Iran's alleged covert activities through a resolution urging Iran to cooperate with the observation of its nuclear projects.

Meanwhile, the US is the second-largest country to acquire nuclear arsenals, with approximately 3,800 stockpiled warheads and 1,373 warheads on ballistic

⁸ “An atomic threat made in America,” Chicago Tribune, accessed September 8, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-061209atoms-day1-story-htmlstory.html>.

⁹ “Iran,” Nuclear Threat Initiative, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/>.

¹⁰ International Atomic Energy Agency. *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Report by the Director General. (Vienna: November 11), https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf.

¹¹ National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, NIC, (Washington, DC: November 2007), https://web.archive.org/web/20101122022043/http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf.

missiles deployed in 2020.¹² As a superpower, it cannot be denied that the tendency of preserving its hegemonic status prevails through strengthening its military power. Its reputation as a superpower contributes to the need for the US to develop a deterrence strategy. In this case, nuclear weapons play a pivotal role in international affairs in response to threats perception on other states' measurements. This factor also poses an alarming issue to the international human rights society responding to the destructive nature of developing nuclear weapons regardless of their claimed purposes.

From its nature, both countries seek to preserve their national security agenda by possessing nuclear weapons from the international perspective. However, the Western point of view seems to exert domination over the issue as the US government prevails to exert pressure on Iran. The US Department of Defense is accountable for its national supply of weapons, deployments, and safeguard measures. They are also responsible for placing Iran's ambitions at nuclear weapons development under the Pentagon's radar.¹³ Consequently, the US government has instituted efforts to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions in the last decade through an economic sanction involving third-parties mediators, such as France and Germany, namely the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPO).¹⁴ However, when the Donald Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018,

¹² "Nuclear weapon modernization continues but the outlook for arms control is bleak: New SIPRI Yearbook out now," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/nuclear-weapon-modernization-continues-outlook-arms-control-bleak-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>.

¹³ "Nuclear Controversy." *Inside the Pentagon* 33, no. 41 (2017), p.1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90014063>.

¹⁴ Satwika Paramasatya, Sigit Wiranto, "Konfrontasi Amerika Serikat dan Iran dalam *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA)," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, Vol. 12 No.2 (2019), pp.297-298, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20473/jhi.v12i2.14047>

Iran progressively contravened the deal, eventually surpassing pre-JCPOA enrichment levels to 60% purity.¹⁵ Hence, this issue concerns the international community as US-Iran's tension on nuclear use surged to threaten geopolitical stability and eventually existential threat. Therefore, both countries seem to be on the edge of disregarding international nuclear deals in achieving national interests.

As mentioned above, treaties and international deals have been signed. However, there have been no significant changes in the behaviour of both countries in their agenda of a nuclear use. The tension infiltrates into a conflict as the US continues to suppress Iran for its nuclear activities. Although the role of the government is the most crucial in actually resolving the issue, there is a need to address the conflict at a societal level to transform the public perceptions and construct a sustainable peace between the two countries through a theological approach considering both countries' affiliations with religious stakeholders. This is where the approach of interfaith dialogue is put on the table in addressing the issue. One example of a recent dialogue was the US-Iranian Religious Leaders' Dialogue: The Relevance of Moral Questions Related to Nuclear Weapons conducted by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in October 2014 to scrutinise the fundamental moral questions regarding weapons of mass destruction between Americans and Iranians.¹⁶ Unfortunately, there have been no signs of

¹⁵ Francois Murphy, "IAEA confirms Iran has started enriching uranium to 60% purity," *Reuters*, April 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-confirms-iran-has-started-enriching-uranium-60-purity-2021-04-17/>.

¹⁶ "US-Iranian Religious Leaders' Dialogue: The Relevance of Moral Questions Related to Nuclear Weapons," Arms Control Association, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/events/2014-10/us-iranian-religious-leaders%E2%80%99-dialogue-relevance-moral-questions-related-nuclear>.

achieving its goals from all the dialogues conducted as the conflict on nuclear use persisted in recent years.

In retrospect of the previous and current attempts, the essence of interfaith dialogue is rather promising. In this case, the approach of interfaith dialogue is still profoundly questioned, especially in addressing high political conflict surrounding nuclear use. It is still a complex matter considering that conflict transformation does not generate direct output, and promoting tolerance and mutual understanding over religious and cultural differences is impossible to attain overnight. Therefore, this study perceives the matter as an interesting subject to explore why the current approach of interfaith dialogue has not contributed significantly to the aforementioned issue.

1.2 Research Questions

According to the background of the topic, there are two (2) research questions that will be answered in this research:

1. How does the process of interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran transpire?
2. What are the roles and limitations of interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran?

1.3 Research Objectives

Following the research questions and the making of this research, this research aims to:

1. Describe the process of the interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran for peace-building process.
2. Describe the roles and limitations of the interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran.

The result of this research will scrutinise the interconnection between the variables above upon being discussed.

1.4 Research Significance

This research is expected to generate critical contributions to the scientific development within the international relations field, mainly for addressing an alarming state of a conflict involving external parties at a societal level. Taking into account the nature of this research in describing the practice, roles, and limitations of interfaith dialogue, it is expected to give significant insights on the use of interfaith dialogue as a supporting instrument for raising the moral questions of a nuclear use, preventing the escalation of conflict, and facilitating conflict transformation, especially for countries with polarising religious culture with an adverse historical background like the US and Iran. The outcome of this research is also expected to be valuable for the readers and can be utilised as a credible source of reference for other research with similar themes in the future.

1.5 Structure of Writing

This research consists of five chapters. The first chapter presents the introduction of the issue, actors, and relevancy of the research. The research

questions, objectives, and significance are also presented to direct the discussions for the following chapters.

The second chapter focuses on assembling the theoretical framework, including literature reviews with the theories and concepts used throughout the research. Three literature review themes are used in this research as the basis of descriptions and analysis in answering the research questions: the Influence of Religion and Faith in Policymaking, Interfaith Dialogue as a Tool of Peacebuilding, and Perceptions on Nuclear Use in the United States and Iran. Meanwhile, this research also explains one IR theory and five concepts to supplement the findings of this research.

The third chapter is specifically allocated to explain the research method. It consists of the research approach, data collection technique, and data analysis technique.

The fourth chapter consists of the most critical part of the research: the analysis to answer the research questions. The collected preliminary findings are described and analysed using the theory and concepts while systematically connecting the significant data findings.

The last chapter includes the conclusion of the research, supplied with the recapitulation of the whole research. Furthermore, the fifth chapter also includes recommendations for further research, especially in adopting interfaith dialogues for conflict transformation.