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The Pandemic's Implications for Iran's Nuclear Program

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Brief Analysis

Although the leadership in Tehran seems preoccupied with the coronavirus, the international community must still watch out for any attempts to exploit the situation via clandestine nuclear activities.

Since 2006, Iran has distinguished the twentieth of Farvardin as its “National Nuclear Technology Day,” an opportunity to unveil (and often exaggerate) advancements in the country’s nuclear program while glorifying the regime’s persistence in the face of Western sanctions. [Past holidays](#) have unveiled the mastery of industrial uranium enrichment (2007), a nuclear fuel manufacturing plant near Isfahan (2009), and the development of “third-generation centrifuges” (2010).

Normally, the event’s peak is a festive ceremony attended by the president, but this year’s holiday was different. In light of the “possible risks” stemming from the coronavirus outbreak, the director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Ali Akbar Salehi, announced that the nuclear festivals scheduled for April 8 would be postponed. The decision was probably influenced by the significant number of high-ranking Iranian officials who have been infected by the disease after attending ceremonies and meetings (most recently Ali Larijani, speaker of the parliament).

In any case, the regime leadership does not appear to be focused on the nuclear program at the moment. President Hassan Rouhani did not issue a statement commemorating the holiday, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei did not make a single reference to the nuclear program in his March 22 [Nowruz speech](#), an important annual address that traditionally serves as a litmus test for his thoughts on this and other foreign policy issues.

To be sure, AEOI spokesperson Behrouz Kamalvandi did take the time to announce that Iran has notched “122 new nuclear achievements” over the past year (most of which are probably limited to minor improvements). He also

emphasized that Tehran has no restrictions on its research and development activities, and that it has reached a production capacity similar to that seen before the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with sixty advanced centrifuges manufactured every day, well above the number permitted under the nuclear deal. He continued by issuing absurd statements regarding the regime's capabilities, claiming that it will expand its daily manufacturing capacity to over 60,000 advanced centrifuges, that it can achieve 250,000 separative work units (a measure of centrifuge efficiency and output during uranium enrichment), and that its eventual target is 1,000,000 SWUs.

NUCLEAR STRATEGY IN THE PANDEMIC'S SHADOW

Overwrought declarations aside, the more important question is whether the regime has continued its months-long pattern of systematically testing and violating restrictions amid the coronavirus outbreak. In May 2019, Iran notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it would be setting aside some of the limitations imposed under the nuclear deal. Since then, it has taken five steps—one every sixty days—to reduce its JCPOA commitments:

1. Exceeding the amount of low-enriched uranium it is permitted to store (as of last month, it had accumulated more than a ton of this material)
2. Increasing its enrichment level beyond 3.67 percent of the fissile isotope U-235 (for explanations of this and other technical issues, see The Washington Institute's [Iran Nuclear Glossary](#))
3. Expanding the scope of its R&D on advanced centrifuges to increase their quality and quantity
4. Injecting gas into centrifuges at the Fordow mountain enrichment plant
5. Announcing that the program would no longer be “subject to any restrictions in the operational sphere”

The fifth step came in January, but the regime has not taken any new ones since then, and has failed to implement its previous steps to their fullest extent. For example, despite threatening to do so many times, Iran has not commenced enriching uranium to 20 percent, or activated new IR-1 centrifuges in its Natanz facility, or suspended the Additional Protocol that gives the IAEA wider verification abilities (though it still [denies the agency access](#) to locations that may have been used for past nuclear work, including suspected weaponization-related activities).

The gap between Iran's aggressive declarations and actual activities may be explained in Salehi's April 5 interview with the Iranian newspaper *Etemad*. Rejecting criticism that the regime is limiting its nuclear steps to avoid political repercussions, he emphasized the pros of focusing on centrifuge R&D (“which is not reversible...even in the event of complete reconciliation with the [remaining JCPOA parties]”), while avoiding any concrete promise of future actions. He further noted that from a cost-value perspective, suspending the Additional Protocol or withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty would not be an effective way for Iran to achieve its goals, but would instead inflict more pressure on the country.

This logic is probably the main factor behind the regime's decision to withhold major nuclear measures for the time being. Khamenei usually prefers taking a calculated and cautious approach over unnecessary risks. Given the challenges Iran has faced over the past few months—not just the pandemic, but also [widespread protests](#) and increasing [economic pressures](#)—he surely understands that now is hardly the time to take a leap forward in nuclear strategy. He has also repeatedly shown that he prefers making decisions by consensus through a structured process of consultations in various regime committees and councils. The country's current medical situation makes this process very difficult, if not impossible, so he is unlikely to expedite major strategic decisions anytime soon.

CHALLENGES FOR THE WEST

Although coronavirus concerns have seemingly knocked the nuclear program down several spots on Tehran’s agenda, one must keep in mind that the international community is similarly preoccupied with the pandemic. In other words, the situation is ripe for potential exploitation should the regime decide to act while the world is distracted.

For example, the IAEA’s ability to continue verifying Iranian compliance with nuclear agreements may be affected by the crisis. Although the agency recently emphasized that its safeguards inspections are continuing worldwide, it also indicated that it may experience “some travel disruption”—a factor that could impede efforts to effectively monitor virus-stricken Iran. The IAEA uses remote surveillance systems to keep an eye on the country’s nuclear facilities, but some verification routines still require onsite visits.

Another cause for concern is Iran’s long scoresheet as a nuclear cheater. Its past infractions include building a clandestine enrichment facility in Fordow, hiding a nuclear archive after the JCPOA was reached, and refusing to cooperate with the IAEA’s investigation of its past activities. As described previously, Tehran is generally risk-averse in deciding if and when to pursue such steps. Even so, the international community needs to exercise extra vigilance in the coming weeks. The IAEA should take steps to ensure the pandemic does not create any blind spots in its monitoring of Iran; it should also report any sign of deception. Ultimately, however, the agency’s view of Iran’s nuclear activities may still be hindered during this crisis, so Western governments should invest the appropriate resources and attention to ensure a clear picture.

Omer Carmi, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, previously led IDF analytical and research efforts pertaining to the Middle East. ❖



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