

# If Iran Can't Be Stopped Now, All Bets Are Off

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Articles & Testimony

**E**arlier today, President Obama, British Prime Minister Brown, and French President Sarkozy dramatically confirmed that Iran has been covertly building near the city of Qom a second uranium enrichment facility. Obama said the "size and configuration" is "inconsistent with a peaceful program," suggesting that it is intended for military purposes. The revelation will prompt very different reactions from different people.

Some will find the news shocking. And that the Iranian regime would so brazenly flout the international community and the IAEA, despite Iran's own assurances of cooperation and the very real possibility of war or harsh sanctions, is something indeed. Others will find it utterly predictable, based both on the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate's December 2007 conclusion that "Iran would probably use covert facilities . . . for the production of highly enriched uranium for a weapon" -- and on Iran's history of evasion. Iran concealed its first uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, opening it to IAEA inspections only following its public disclosure by Iranian dissidents in 2002, and continues to refuse to answer the IAEA's questions about its work on nuclear weaponization.

The Iranian regime and its backers will have a different reaction altogether -- they will insist that Tehran had no obligation to disclose the existence of the facility, having unilaterally terminated its implementation of the part of its NPT Safeguards Agreement requiring advance notice of the construction of nuclear sites. Thus far, Iranian nuclear officials have confirmed reports about the enrichment plant while insisting that it is for civilian purposes, and Iranian President Ahmadinejad has warned that it would be a "mistake" to press the regime on the issue.

Whatever one's reaction, the actions now taken in light of this news by Iran and the international community will be decisive. Obama, Brown, and Sarkozy were right to stress the need for the IAEA to investigate it seriously and for Iran to meet UN demands which it has heretofore disregarded. One can expect that the information revealed today will be used not only to press Iran to treat seriously the talks that are slated to begin on Oct. 1 in Geneva, but also to convince recalcitrant partners Russia and China (whose leaders are present in Pittsburgh but did not join Obama, Brown, and Sarkozy on the stage this morning) to support tough sanctions against Iran in the likely event that those talks prove inconclusive. If in fact Iran does not comply with international demands, then Moscow and Beijing will be put to the test -- if they refuse to support sanctions even in light of this new deception by Tehran, they are unlikely ever to do so, and the U.S. and its allies will need to move forward without them or weigh other options.

However, even if Iran, whether out of a genuine policy shift or simply an effort to forestall sanctions, embarks on negotiations and promises cooperation, this revelation will severely diminish the international community's confidence in the regime's sincerity, as Sarkozy noted today. As a result, the possible compromises -- whether promises from Tehran not to enrich or some form of "limited enrichment" on Iranian soil -- will look less attractive to the U.S. and its allies. If Iran could repeatedly assure the IAEA of its cooperation and publicly deny wrongdoing while at the same time secretly building an underground enrichment plant, what confidence can one have in an agreement that depends vitally on the regime's willingness to uphold its promises?

At the very least, today's revelations will mean that any agreement must contain water-tight verification provisions. However, they also mean that the international community's "no-deal option" -- a military strike on Iranian nuclear

facilities -- will look more attractive. Sarkozy suggested today that "everything must be put on the table" likely will reflect greater support for the military option in Israel, the U.S., and elsewhere. Israel's decision, in particular, about whether to exercise that option will likely be heavily influenced not only by Iran's reaction to today's news, but also by that of Washington and the P5+1.

Today's revelation represents a crisis of confidence not only for international diplomacy with Iran, but also for the global nonproliferation regime. That both Syria and Iran could covertly build nuclear facilities despite IAEA activity in these countries suggests that rogue regimes have little respect for international nonproliferation rules. If the IAEA and the international community fail to act in response to the information revealed today, their attitudes will be vindicated and global counter-proliferation will be a shambles.

Gordon Brown suggested that Iran's "serial deception" meant that the "international community must draw a line in the sand." Such lines have been drawn in the past, and Iran has trampled them. What is needed now is not another ephemeral line, but international cooperation -- not only from the U.S. and Europe, but also from Russia and China and the world's emerging powers -- to build a firm wall that stops Iranian nuclear weapons progress and other illicit proliferation activities cold. If we cannot muster the determination to build such a wall and defend it, then we should gird ourselves for a far more dangerous world.

Michael Singh is the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖

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