

The Ticking Clock toward a Nuclear Iran

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May 26, 2005

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Brief Analysis

The periodic crises in Iranian-European negotiations over Iran's nuclear program -- including yesterday's proposal offered by the British, French, and German foreign ministries that has yet to be accepted by Tehran -- trigger some important questions: Who profits more from extending the talks? Does the West really prevent Iranian nuclearization through the freeze on enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, or is Iran using these talks as a shield behind which it continues to pursue important components of its nuclear program? The international community must define the timeframe for dealing with Iranian nuclearization and therefore set limits on the current phase of diplomacy.

The Timeframe for Preventing Nuclearization

The deadline question came up during the April 11 talks between President George W. Bush and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon at Crawford, Texas. While Israelis talk in terms of months, Americans talk in terms of years. These differing timeframes are the result of different approaches to defining the "point of no return" in the Iranian nuclear project. The Israeli approach emphasizes the time needed for Iran to master the fuel cycle and become capable of independently enriching uranium to a level of purity suitable for a nuclear device. The Iranian nuclear program has encountered some technical hurdles in the enrichment process, particularly with regard to the enrichment of uranium with a "cascade" of centrifuges. Israeli intelligence estimates that it could take the Iranians six to twelve months to overcome these hurdles, and then about three more years to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear device. From the Israeli point of view, once Iran masters the technology of the fuel cycle, Tehran could more easily pursue nuclear weapons in the context of a clandestine program, one that would be much harder to stop.

But the prevailing American school of thought contends that there is more time to deal effectively with Iranian nuclearization than Israel suggests. The U.S. approach identifies the effective point of no return as when Iran gathers enough fissile material to complete its first nuclear device. Indeed, the most recent intelligence testimony to Congress estimates this achievement as taking no less than five years, and probably more. From the American point

of view, current European engagement with Tehran could prolong the Iranian advance toward mastering the fuel cycle, and once it achieves that technical proficiency, Iran may require four to five more years to produce sufficient quantities of fissile material to build a nuclear device. U.S. policymakers predominantly believe that there could be an opportunity to halt Tehran's nuclear ambitions even at that late stage.

However, once Iran masters the fuel cycle, it could move secretly to build atomic bombs either immediately and at full power or in a delayed manner that would allow international pressure to dissipate. While it may still be possible to pressure Tehran in the later stages of uranium stockpiling, it may be much harder to monitor Iranian activities at that point, making it more difficult for international players to choose and agree on any course of action.

A Parallel Clandestine Program?

The fundamental question is whether Iran is running a parallel, clandestine nuclear program in addition to its openly declared program. Although definitive evidence is lacking, most Western intelligence agencies believe that Iran has such a program. In recent months, specific intelligence attributed to reliable sources was made public to the effect that Iran is developing a warhead for a missile with the distinctive characteristics of a nuclear warhead.

However, Western governments commonly estimate that if Iran has a clandestine program, it is probably not fully operational. Some essential components of the Iranian nuclear program that had been clandestine (such as the major uranium enrichment facility in Natanz) were exposed in recent years and subjected to international monitoring; Iran needs time to replace them. Most importantly, some essential components (such as a uranium conversion plant like the one currently shut down in Esfahan) may not be easy to conceal.

If Tehran is running or developing a parallel, clandestine program of uranium conversion and enrichment, then its talks with the British, French, and Germans (the E3) are buying time for Iran. In that case, Tehran would have an interest in dragging out the talks as long as possible, using brinkmanship and occasionally staging a crisis but never breaking off the conversation.

The more likely scenario is that Iran does have a partial clandestine program, but it lacks some elements currently under international monitoring in the overt program. Tehran may fear that it cannot copy those elements in clandestine form without risking exposure. In that case, the question of who gains over time, the West or Iran, yields a mixed answer. On the one hand, Iran is buying time by simultaneously advancing and perhaps expanding its existing clandestine programs, while advancing the overt components of the parallel plutonium channel that are not covered by the Iran-E3 agreement (these nonfrozen overt programs include the reactor in Bushehr and the natural-uranium heavy-water plant in Arak). On the other hand, the current freeze on uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities is probably holding up progress on other important components of Iran's nuclear program, such as the conversion of uranium into uranium hexafluoride (UF₆), the last step in preparing material for refinement in centrifuges. Thus, if the E3 caves in to Iran's demand to maintain and operate a "symbolic" number of centrifuges, or to complete the conversion to UF₆ and then send the material for centrifuging abroad, Tehran could conceivably continue to work out its technical problems and test solutions behind a shield of international legitimacy. Yet if the Europeans do not yield and the Iranians feel the balance of time tipping against them, Iran may break off the talks and resume work on the missing links in the nuclear chain.

Conclusion

Even if Iran has a parallel clandestine program, it may need to resume overt conversion and enrichment activities in order to solve some technical problems and provide cover for further clandestine work. Iran's overt nuclear activities must therefore remain blocked. The recent strong European reaction to Iran's declared intention to resume overt conversion served to demonstrate that Tehran can be made to think twice if it is faced with a sufficiently high price tag.

At the same time, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has suggested, "You don't know what you don't know." Given the high stakes, the West should take a prudent approach and assume that there may be more activity persisting in the Iranian program than is obvious -- possibly additional components or technical shortcuts. Such was the case in the nuclear programs of Libya and Iraq. Because time may be on Iran's side, the international community should not allow Tehran to draw out an endless and pointless diplomacy phase, but rather prepare to set time limits on the current phase.

To enhance the chance of successful diplomacy and at the same time prepare for its failure, the United States and the Europeans should work out, as soon as possible, a wide range of containment and deterrent options designed to isolate Tehran. This may ultimately push Iran to change course and opt for a bargain. As the clock ticks toward the "ticking" of an Iranian nuclear bomb, time, indeed, is of the essence.

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