

Gaining Support for Action on Iran's Nuclear Program

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Brief Analysis

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), whose report about Iran leaked out yesterday, will soon have to decide whether to declare Iran noncompliant with its obligations under the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). What the world does about Iran's nuclear program will largely determine the future of efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The IAEA's Disturbing News

Although the IAEA report tries to put as positive a spin as it can on Iran's actions, the facts it reports are highly troubling. After listing a long set of issues on which the agency is either awaiting further information or evaluating Iran's response, the report acknowledges, "information and access were at times slow in coming and incremental, and ... some of the information was in contrast to that previously provided by Iran." The report is silent, however, on the key problem raised by Iran's actions, namely, the prospect that Iran is stalling while it races ahead to complete its nuclear program -- which it would then present as a *fait accompli*.

Nor is it reassuring to learn that Iran has changed its account regarding its centrifuge program. Iran's current story is that it imported key parts for its centrifuges. This story conveniently explains the IAEA's detection of highly enriched (weapons-grade) uranium at Iran's centrifuge facility by blaming the presence of this uranium on contaminated foreign (i.e., Pakistani) equipment. If true, that means Iran has in fact had substantial foreign assistance and has been effective at concealing that assistance. If this continues to be the case, Iran could be in a position to develop nuclear weapons on a much faster timeline than the three-to-five years that some intelligence services predict would be needed without foreign assistance.

But the current story may be a cover-up: it is not clear that Iran could actually obtain key Pakistani nuclear equipment, given that Pakistani-Iranian relations have not been close and that Pakistan has many reasons to be cautious about exporting such material. The true story may be the older Iranian account, according to which Iran developed the centrifuge technology on its own, using Pakistani blueprints. This scenario would be at least as troubling, because the presence of highly enriched uranium at the Natanz centrifuge plant would mean that Iran has already begun to enrich uranium up to weapons grade. If this is the case, Iran has made much more progress toward acquiring a nuclear weapon than previously thought. And that would mean that Western intelligence agencies -- which knew little if anything about the huge Natanz facility until pointed in that direction by the Iranian Mujahedin-

e Khalq opposition group -- would have once again underestimated Iranian nuclear activities.

It is likely that the September 8-10 IAEA Board of Governors meeting will at least call for an urgent Iranian response to outstanding questions. This will presumably be the case even if the agency decides to postpone (until the November Board meeting) a decision about whether Tehran has been given more than enough chances, but has failed to provide the prompt and full disclosure needed to reassure the international community that Iran is no longer lying or covering up -- as it now implicitly acknowledges it has done in the past.

Security Council Options

At some point, the IAEA Board may take the ultimate sanction available to it, namely, referral of the matter to the UN Security Council. The Security Council's options are not reassuring: it is not clear that the council could reach consensus about what to do, nor is it clear that any measures the council might adopt could persuade or force Iran to abandon its nuclear program. The worst option, however, would be for the council to do nothing effective. Aside from the political damage this would cause the UN, inaction would encourage other potential proliferators to join Iran in flouting the NPT. Security Council dithering might lead key Middle Eastern states to conclude that they have to act on their own against the threat posed by Iran: Israel could take preemptive military action, and Saudi Arabia or others may decide to acquire nuclear weapons of their own (after all, the Saudis long ago purchased Chinese missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads, and many in the region suspect that Saudis financed Pakistan's nuclear program). A summary of Security Council options at this point would include:

Banning the export to Iran of nuclear and military technology. A Security Council resolution would provide Russia with a good opportunity to block the first shipment of nuclear fuel to the nearly completed Bushehr power plant. The council could also block Iranian access to technologies for its missiles, which are of just the design needed to carry nuclear weapons and which serve little purpose unless armed with WMD. If a comprehensive ban on access to military technologies were imposed on Iran, it might fuel internal debate about whether nuclear weapons contribute to Iran's security or instead isolate the country to such an extent that its security is undermined.

Freezing new economic agreements with Iran. The European Union has stated that in the event of no progress on the nuclear front, it will break off negotiations with Iran for the Trade Cooperation Agreement badly wanted by Tehran. The United States would certainly continue to block Iran's application to join the World Trade Organization. And Japan would presumably continue to suspend the multibillion-dollar investment by its oil companies in the giant Azadegan oil field. At a minimum, the Security Council could give its blessing to such measures. A further step would be to call for a suspension of new international agreements with Iran -- the most important of which would be new investment agreements in the oil and gas industry, which provide the Iranian government with the vast majority of its revenues.

Imposing broader economic sanctions on Iran. This seems a less fruitful course. France, Russia, and China are leery of open-ended economic sanctions, which they think were ineffective or counterproductive in the Iraq instance. In any case, Iran has long, open borders already much used by smugglers, so trade restrictions might not work well. Neither are restrictions on new loans likely to make much difference, given that Iran has at least \$15 billion, if not billions more, in foreign-exchange reserves.

Declaring unacceptable any Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons. At a minimum, the Security Council could adopt a strong statement to deter Iran from taking the final step of acquiring nuclear weapons. More effective at deterring Iran would be a resolution which implies that, failing all else, use of force could be appropriate to stop Iran from assembling or testing nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

Much progress has been made in exposing Iran's nuclear program and in forging an international will to respond

vigorously. Now the time has come to move to the next stage, that is, to develop a consensus on possible Security Council actions if the IAEA Board condemns Iranian noncompliance. Developing such a consensus will be of great importance -- for the Bush administration, for the Security Council, for the global nonproliferation regime, and for preserving peace in the Middle East. Given the high stakes, the effort should soon move into high gear.

Finally, the continuing stream of revelations about Iran's nuclear program suggests that the United States would do well to collect all the information it can about that program. Accordingly, it is difficult to understand why the U.S. government has instead chosen this moment to shut down the one organization that has been able to provide human intelligence about Iran's nuclear program, namely, the Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq opposition group and its front, the National Council of Resistance. Odious as those groups may be, the notion of Iran possessing nuclear weapons is even more odious.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute.

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