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*The Iranian nuclear crisis:
a risk assessment*

by Sir John
Thomson

Photo shows an
aerial view of the
Natanz Nuclear
facility in Iran





Sir John Thomson

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The Iranian nuclear crisis: a risk assessment

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These Discussion Papers are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context.

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Many people believe that Iran is cultivating a threshold nuclear weapon status by developing the essential infrastructure to enrich uranium. Best estimates suggest that Iran is several years and possibly a decade away from any potential nuclear weapon. This allows the international community time to prevent any possible acquisition through targeted diplomacy. This project addresses the policy challenges arising from the path to a credible and sustainable solution to the crisis surrounding Iran's nuclear program. It is our belief that such a solution will require the underlying U.S.-Iranian hostility to be addressed; Iran's security needs to be met; and its desire to be treated as a responsible international player respected. This discussion paper series is part of our commitment to provide accurate and timely information and analysis on Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context.

The project also publishes Iran Update, a free weekly email news and comment digest on the diplomatic movements over Iran's nuclear program. Read current and back issues at <http://www.basicint.org/updates/iran.htm>

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The Iranian nuclear crisis: a risk assessment

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The evidence about Mr. Bush's intentions towards Iran is at present incomplete. The threats, semi-threats and military moves can be seen as gun-boat diplomacy ratcheting up the pressure on Iran to cease enriching uranium, or as preparing the way for military action to unseat the regime of the mullahs, or as petulance. The first option, ratcheting up the pressure, is a certainty but will it lead on to either of the other two? You can take your pick since the President himself has probably not yet made the choice. He would like almost certainly to unseat the regime even if the military action produced quite a lot of casualties and a great deal of condemnation. But some costs would be too much. Even such a risk taker as Mr. Bush might quail at the prospect of tripling the risk of terrorist attacks on US citizens and quadrupling the risks for Israel. In that case, he might have to settle for petulance – giving the Iranians a hard time without expecting it to lead to any particularly favorable outcome. Or, if the first option works, he might leave it at that.

Rumors of military attack: playing to the crowds at home and abroad

Most of the rumors about impending American (or Israeli) attacks on Iran come from Washington and often appear to be based on official briefing or hinting. The President himself, for example in his speech to the nation about Iraq on January 10, threatened Iran (and Syria) openly enough to confer credibility on the rumors.

Since Bush rejected the ladder offered by the Baker-Hamilton report in late 2006, he remains deep in his self-dug Iraqi hole and is still digging. It does not need the dismal figures of public opinion polling to tell him that he badly needs a distraction. Blaming Iran and Syria for “meddling” in the mess in Iraq usefully helps to explain the US failure there while also turning attention towards the opening of a new drama. Threatening to attack Iran extends the problem but also redefines it. Success vis-à-vis Iran and/or Syria would help to offset failure in Iraq and to the optimistically-minded might even spell victory in the Middle East. Thus the intended audience for the threats and rumors is the American public as well as the Iranian leadership.

As always, difficulties arise in communicating openly with two audiences. You want the Iranians to think they had better give way to avoid war while you want Americans to understand that it is not really war, just a clever diplomatic ploy to defeat evil foreigners, war by other means. So you issue denials to placate at least some Americans while being well aware that others and, of course, the Iranians will see in them a parallel to the claims before the attack on Iraq. The degree of credibility at home declines but that is the price for keeping your enemies guessing and maintaining your options.

Other less important audiences such as the Europeans and the Arabs will generally, though suspiciously, accept assurances at something like face value. But then there is the most dangerous audience of all, the international markets especially for energy and money. They can in an hour or two turn from positive to negative. When they turn many of your supporters turn too. To keep all the policy options in the air indefinitely is a major feat but at present Mr. Bush is doing it.

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If it is premature to predict with confidence what will happen, it is none too soon to assess the risks of what is happening. In this study, risks are assessed in relation to Western interests though these are not always homogeneous.

If, as we have said, Mr. Bush's threats and military moves such as stationing a second carrier strike force in the Gulf are intended to oblige the Iranian leadership to give way in the nuclear crisis, what are the risks they will fail? Of course, it is possible that Mr. Bush's objectives are wider, that he aims to force the Iranians to change their policies on a number of issues in addition to the nuclear ones. For the sake of clarity, this assessment assumes that the objective is limited to an Iranian retreat on nuclear issues only and that that is Mr. Bush's genuine objective. It leaves on one side both the evidence that Mr. Bush's main objective is regime change and suspicions that some well-placed people in Washington hope that Iran will be obdurate on the nuclear issue if that produces an acceptable excuse for severe military action.

Given that the threats are uttered by the world's dominant military power, the risk that they will fail is surprisingly large. The basic reason is that the West is staking everything on an outcome, the permanent or at least indefinite suspension of enrichment by Iran, which the Iranians see as contrary to their national interests and are determined to resist. The logic is simple. The West may fancy it is challenging Islamic extremists – and that would have been true in the not so distant past – but today the nub of the challenge is to Iranian nationalism and the issue selected, the nuclear program, is of all issues the one most likely to unite Iranians and to strengthen arguments for a deterrent “bomb”.

Preventing enrichment - a bridge too far?

Not only is stopping enrichment permanently probably “a bridge too far” but the technique employed has a poor track record. Instead of dealing directly with the Iranian leadership, Western policy aims to provoke and squeeze the Iranian population, especially certain sections of it, such as the bazaars. Aimed at a democracy this tactic has some chance of working over a longish period though the Iraq experience is not encouraging. The insurgents have succeeded (through body bags and opinion polling) in turning Americans against their government's policy but so far it has had no effect, unless it be a negative one, on the White House. Using this technique against an authoritarian theocracy and on an issue personifying national pride smacks of inefficiency.ⁱ

There are several secondary reasons:

- the “carrots” offered are substantial but not very enticing;
- the “sticks” are not big enough: probably nothing short of the leadership's conviction of the imminent destruction of the Iranian economy and hence of their own position would suffice;
- the Iranians have been experimenting with the technology for 12 months and may well “master” it in 2007; once they do, they will not give up what they have won and will think they are on course to win more; time is not on the Western side;
- the widespread suspicion that beneath the non-proliferation rhetoric, the real Western objective is regime change stiffens nearly all Iranians and weakens the non-proliferation camp; Western tactics as outlined above (which might be suitable for a lengthy process of regime change) play into the hands of the hard-liners and dismay the moderates.
- Western tactics are limited by what Russia and China will support,ⁱⁱ and the Western objective is continually restated.ⁱⁱⁱ

Changing course

We are running out of time and options. The West has been ratcheting up pressure for some years and now both sides have used up their small ammunition. Under current policy, we are approaching a final dilemma: military confrontation or an Iranian bomb. Military action means mainly a more or less extensive bombing campaign while the alternative is some weak move which effectively allows the Iranians to get away with their defiance and do whatever they choose. If and when we reach this dilemma, Western leaders will have an agonizing choice. Mr. Bush will be inclined to go for military action, European, Russian and Chinese leaders not. The nearer we get to this point, the more the latter group will join the Iranians in wishing to delay and string out events until at least 2009.

Through evasions and procrastinations, the Iranians have for three or four years fended off a climax to the crisis. No doubt they will continue with tactical retreats and offers demanding discussion. For instance, a “double suspension” proposal: the Security Council suspends its sanctions for as long as the Iranians suspend “enrichment”, say for three months in the first place. Or they could re-offer an amalgam of previous proposals covering Iraq, Israel and other matters of interest to the West. To pin them down over the next year or two will be hard. Their changes of emphasis mirror differences within the leadership on important issues such as whether to have a nuclear weapons program. But on the most basic issue of all, enrichment on Iranian soil they are united and therefore unlikely to change whatever the pressures.

This being so, Western leaders should conclude that:

- their present maximalist demands are probably unattainable;
- if they persist with them for too long, they will bring about what they want to prevent, Iranian nuclear weapons;
- if they persist with them beyond a certain indefinable point (which may be at hand) they will cause the Iranians to suppose they are winning and so need not make major concessions;
- accordingly, they should opt for a modification of course – the sooner the safer – while maintaining the objective of no nuclear weapons in Iranian hands;
- if they do not delay too long and if they take fair account of Iranian national feelings, their main objective is probably still attainable.

No course is risk-free and a modification also involves risks. It may come too late to help the moderates. It may come so late that it appears not as a constructive compromise but as a desperate attempt to ward off an agonizing dilemma. Inevitably, if a change means that Iranians are involved in any working with technology it will enhance their technical knowledge and that might seem to make it easier for them to “break out” one day. A change of course could involve negotiations strung out to the Greek Kalends.

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*Inside of an Iranian nuclear facility
Photo © European Communities, 1995-2006
www.europarl.europa.eu*

...staying the course is more likely than a prudent change to produce an Iranian bomb.

These are amongst the leading risks in a change of course, but in each case the antidote is to hand. The Western powers do not have to wait until it is too late or the last moment. The Iranians are going to acquire technical knowledge anyway either on their own or by subverting a handful of Pakistani technicians. Security Council resolution 1837 itself allows of negotiations which might be strung out, but in negotiations both sides can, as in the past, impose time limits. And in a deal, Iran has said it will accept strong IAEA safeguards over and above those already in operation to guard against any diversion of material for military purposes, a crucial point.

Balancing the risks of staying the course against those of changing it, which is more likely to lead in the next decade to an Iranian bomb? How serious will it be if staying the course fails? To what risks will we then be exposed?

It would be too much to claim that the failure of the present course is certain. But combining the probability of failure with the gravity of its consequences leads to the conclusion that staying the course is more likely than a prudent change to produce an Iranian bomb.

Failure to achieve indefinite suspension will be highly visible with consequences domestically and abroad. Domestically, the Europeans are likely to recognize the failure for what it is and consequently will look for an alternative course. By contrast, the Bush administration is likely to remain in a state of denial and to insist that more carrots and especially more sticks are thrown at the problem without changing course. A gap in Western unity will open.

The effect abroad will be more damaging. The idea that the NPT and the whole non-proliferation regime is in an advanced state of unravelment will be confirmed. The non-nuclear developing world will have their suspicions substantiated that all along the real Western object was regime change disguised as non-proliferation. Otherwise, we would not have been so obstinate for so long, thus undermining non-proliferation.

Worse will be the practical effects. The Iranians will be in a position to do as they please. If the hard-line faction predominates, Iran will make nuclear weapons.

This prospect will upset several states and may lead Turkey and one or two Arab countries to follow the Iranian lead. Israel will be very unhappy and will try to get the US to take firm and perhaps violent action. The Iranians will become more assertive especially vis-à-vis the Gulf states and may step up their nuclear program. What line will the US take if it discovers, for example, that Saudi Arabia and Egypt are secretly preparing military nuclear programs? Such prospects will tempt some in Washington to cut the Gordian knot by some form of military attack on Iran.

Consequences of an attack on Iran

To assess the effectiveness of an attack on Iran is difficult and it is still more so to gauge the political and security ramifications. Three things are certain: it will solidify the Iranian regime, the Iranians will spare no effort to acquire a nuclear arsenal and they will retaliate. Retaliation will include Israel as well as the US and it will be long-lasting, a matter of generations. It will complicate Israel's security problems and its prospects of a decent settlement with the Palestinians. Also it will complicate the Coalition's task in Iraq and add to Coalition, especially British casualties. A good deal of Western public opinion, including in America, will vocally disapprove and European governments may feel obliged to differ publicly with Washington. Action at the UN could present difficulties. The reactions in Asia including Russia, China and India would be hostile. Arab regimes particularly in Riyadh and Cairo would be embarrassed by the strength of their public's anger especially amongst the younger generation. And, indirectly, terrorist organizations would be strengthened. Energy prices would also be affected.

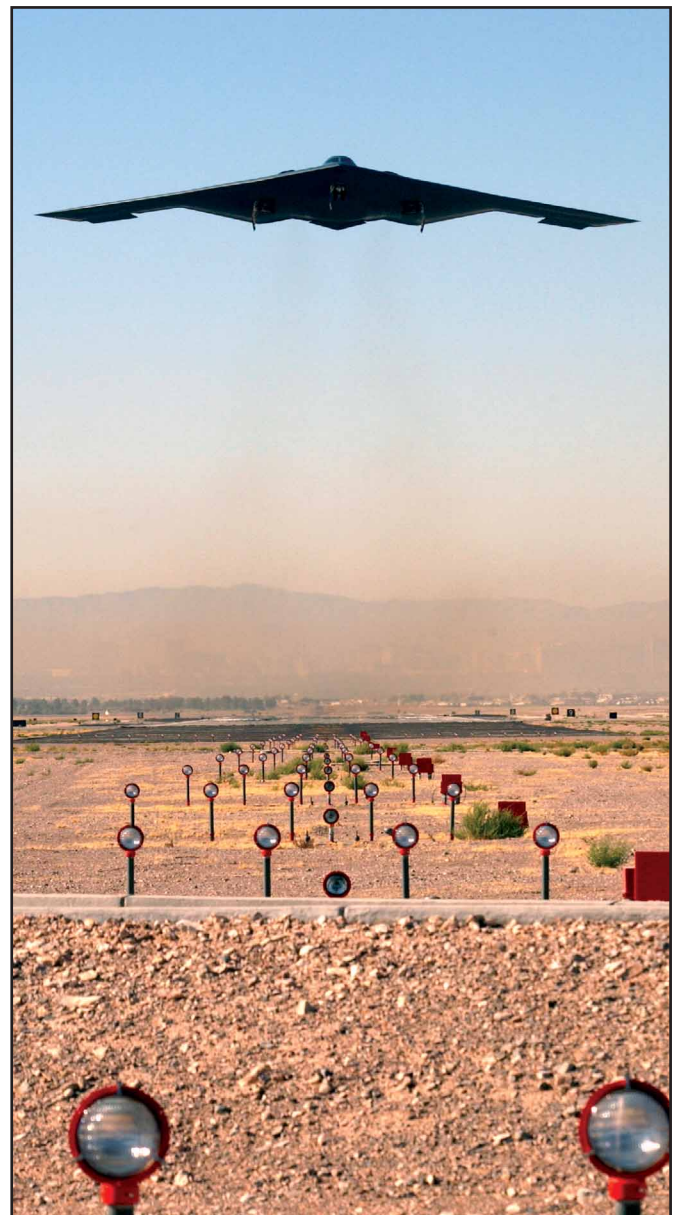
The degree of damage caused to Western interests by bombing Iran would depend partly on the damage caused to Iran. Conventional cruise missiles would produce a less severe reaction than a large-scale bombing campaign. An attack limited to Iranian nuclear installations would be less provocative than attempts to bring Iran to its knees by destroying a large part of its infrastructure. Yet the risks involved in a limited attack on nuclear installations only are surprisingly large. It might not be wholly effective and even if it was, it is most unlikely to lead to the abandonment of Iran's nuclear program. To the contrary, it might cause it to be speeded up and intensified. The hard-liners in Tehran would probably be the gainers. In any event, there would be some degree of retaliation. In short, there is a significant risk of damage without advantage. If there is to be an attack, only one which brings Iran to its knees stands a good chance of putting a permanent stop to its nuclear program.

Broadly speaking, the same considerations apply to the course we have labeled as "petulance". It is hard to see any significant gains in giving the Iranians a hard time that would outweigh the probable reactions. Minor sanctions, blocking activities and pinpricks should be reserved for retaliation against Iranian minor threats and misdeeds. This is not to say that the West should refrain from such actions, only that they should be meted out proportionately in response to Iranian provocations. In that way, they will have some deterrent effect.

What about an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities? This course combines all the risks mentioned above: possible ineffectiveness plus the potential for an aircraft being shot down and the pilot falling into Iranian hands; Iranian national unity and support for the nuclear program; hence a requirement for further attacks in the future; retaliation against Israeli targets both immediately and in the long term; retaliation, perhaps by hard-to-identify agents, against the US whether or not the latter was overtly implicated; the potential for European condemnation (the Financial Times editorially describes it as "a disaster of disasters")^{iv} and for hostility from the Arab "street"; and perhaps severe controversy within Israel. Fortunately, the Israelis have a better understanding of the Middle East than do most people in the West. Consequently, they are likely to perceive the risks and to avoid them.

The drumbeat of Israeli predictions that the Iranians are imminently about to pass some nuclear "red line", usually undefined, is intended partly to scare the Iranians but mainly the Americans. Despite the repeated failure of these predictions, they have influenced the US which is now drumming hard on its own account. In turn, the US anti-Iran campaign is having considerable success with the media. Iran and particularly its bombastic president helpfully provide readily understandable reasons for hostility: hostages, human rights, particularly women's rights, assassinations, torture, suicide bombers, violations of free speech, stoking Islamic extremism, threatening Israel, seeking nuclear weapons, meddling in Iraq and allegedly arming Shia militia. But on the critical question of Iranian nuclear intentions, there is no "smoking gun". Indeed since 2003, there has been no fresh convincing evidence. Perhaps this explains a change of focus in the Bush-Cheney line of attack: the non-proliferation issue is becoming submerged in a catalog of Iranian misdeeds and bad intentions.

The campaign is uncomfortably reminiscent of the run up to the occupation of Iraq in 2003.



*B2 stealth bomber
© US Department of Defense*

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The Israeli-US campaign may have gone too far for some responsible leaders. Prime Minister Olmert called recently on the press to stop claiming that the Iranian threat to Israel is “existential”.^v The new chairman of the U.S. Senate intelligence committee has recently said “the whole concept of moving against Iran is bizarre”.^{vi} The campaign is uncomfortably reminiscent of the run up to the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Once again there is a risk that the nuclear issue will be widely perceived as a stalking horse for Western neo-imperialism. Unfortunate though this would be, it pales beside the probability that staying the course will lead to nuclear weapons in Iranian hands.

Ambiguous Western objectives

A change of course does not necessarily mean a change of objective. But unfortunately the West is ambiguous about its objective.^{vii} All can agree on maximum demands but when it comes to compromise, it seems the Europeans can accept, if they have to, a smaller bottom line than Washington will tolerate. President Bush has stated a triple objective: no Iranian nuclear weapons, no machinery which might be used in making them, no relevant technology. The Europeans are with him on no nuclear weapons in Iranian hands but to get a deal they might not insist on the other two points in all their purity.

All seriously proposed changes of course insist that Iran must not have nuclear weapons and carefully provide safeguards against their doing so. To give them their due, the Iranians also insist that they are not seeking nuclear weapons and that they are prepared to accept maximum international safeguards. But they also claim “rights” under the NPT to machinery and technology. The differences between the various credible schemes for a change of course are variations in their treatment of these two issues. All rely on the IAEA for stringent international safeguards^{viii} and one of them builds in a special extra set of multilateral safeguards.

Three options - a risk assessment of each

Three schemes have particularly attracted attention. Each contains elements of risk and these will now be briefly analyzed. It need hardly be said that there is no risk-free option.

Mothballing

Effectively this amounts to “placing Iran’s enrichment activities in stand-by”, following the example of what the US Enrichment Corporation has done with its insufficiently used gaseous diffusion enrichment plant at Portsmouth. The Iranian enrichment centrifuges currently operating at Natanz would be placed either in Warm or Cold stand-by. The former mode means that the centrifuges continue to spin but produce no enriched uranium while Cold stand-by means a shut-down with modest maintenance and perhaps testing. Warm allows for a “very rapid” restart in the production of enriched uranium while Cold would involve “a matter of weeks or months”. The costs would not be dissimilar.

The political objective is to get negotiations on a long term deal started without the West giving up its requirement for a suspension of operations or the Iranians surrendering their right to own and operate centrifuges for peaceful purposes. The proposal is presented as an interim rather than a permanent solution but there is nothing in it which clearly points to any particular period.

Under either option (especially the Warm one) the Iranians would acquire some useful but not critical technical knowledge. The original proposal spoke of a centrifuge facility of 164 machines – all that Iran was operating at that time– but presumably the risk assessment would scarcely be changed if that number was increased by a factor of three, four, or five to accommodate the actual number of centrifuges operating at Natanz at the time mothballing was agreed. A number over one thousand would be problematic.

Provided sanctions were suspended simultaneously, there is little in the essence of the mothballing idea to which the Iranians could take serious objection. However, it is hard to imagine that they would accept the additional provision that the moratorium would continue indefinitely until its lifting is approved by the Security Council in which the West has three vetoes. That provision sounds like a killer.

The risks to Western interests of the basic mothballing idea without the provision about Security Council approval would be negligible.

Pilot plant

Several schemes (some under the label “limited enrichment”) have been put forward. They have three features in common: they are interim solutions or at least involve several stages of development; they rely on beefing up international inspection, principally through the IAEA; they aim to cap the existing Iranian centrifuge program and then to allow the continued operation of the capped program. This last feature is sometimes referred to as a “pilot plant” because it is a technical stepping stone on the way to an industrial-scale enrichment plant.

The Iranians are building their enrichment program in blocks (called “cascades”) of 164 centrifuges. They are now operating two such cascades. Provided that the program is capped at no more than five cascades or so, the precise number of centrifuges does not matter much because with such a number of their existing type(P-1) it would take several years to produce sufficient High Enriched Uranium (HEU) to make one bomb.

The pilot plant idea concedes that the Iranians will master centrifuge technology. If there is a time limit on the capping or if the Iranians “break out”, they would be able thereafter to scale up their pilot plant to a significant size for HEU production nearly as fast as they manufactured additional centrifuges. Nevertheless, they would be vulnerable to retaliation until they had actually made a bomb.

The basic pilot plant scheme unencumbered by further conditions has the merits of simplicity and speed. Moreover, the West and the Iranians could conceivably reach agreement on this basis. It appears to meet the bottom line on both sides: no nuclear weapon in Iranian hands while permitting enrichment on Iranian soil.

Yet two important difficulties raise doubt about the proposal. The first concerns the potentiality for a “break out” after acquiring legally a significant quantity of Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) which could be turned fairly rapidly into weapons grade High Enriched Uranium (HEU). The second and more serious problem is that a pilot plant provides the best possible cover for establishing and running a clandestine enrichment facility. Materials apparently destined for the pilot plant could be covertly diverted to a clandestine one. And there would be a bureaucratic reason for doing so. Only a fraction of the large corps of Iranian nuclear scientists and engineers would be required to man a pilot plant. The rest would be officially unemployed and therefore anxious and available to run a clandestine operation.

To the extent one believes the Iranian objective is a nuclear arsenal, the risks would be substantial. All the same, if the Western objective (which might well be shared by the Iranians) is to gain time, it would be hard to improve on the pilot plan idea.

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*A US gas centrifuge cascade
Courtesy of the United States Department of Energy*

Multilateral enrichment facility

This proposal (put forward by the author of the present analysis together with Geoffrey Forden) is based on the report (February 2005) of an international IAEA-appointed expert committee. The report investigated alternative ways of assuring Non-Nuclear Weapon States that they could depend upon getting fuel for their nuclear reactors without fear of political conditions. One option considered was to create multilateral i.e. internationally owned and operated enrichment facilities. The proposal under consideration is such a facility, enabling the IAEA to run a virtual fuel bank. If successful, it could be a model for multilateral facilities in different regions of the world covering several aspects of the full fuel cycle.

For present purposes, however, the main thrust of the proposal is, like the pilot plant proposal, to meet the bottom line of the two sides: no nuclear weapons in Iranian hands but enrichment on Iranian soil. It differs from the pilot plant idea in several ways:

- it is a permanent, not an interim solution;
- whereas the pilot plant would be owned and operated by Iran, the proposed enrichment facility would be owned by four governments (the number could be expanded) namely the EU3 (France, Germany, UK) plus Iran and operated by an international company created for the purpose and containing nationals of the governments concerned;
- it would lease the totality of Iranian enrichment-related facilities and employ the corps of Iranian nuclear experts thereby making it unlikely that the Iranians could operate a clandestine facility without detection; the European experts would be watching them at every level in addition to an expanded IAEA inspection program;
- the multilateral company would operate on commercial lines and would aim to make a profit not only by selling to the considerable Iranian civil program (20 1000 MGW reactors by 2035) but also in the global marketplace,
- for political reasons, the facility could begin by operating with the existing Iranian P-I centrifuge (black boxed to preserve secrets) but for commercial reasons these would be replaced within a few months by leased Russian or URENCO machines which would likewise be black boxed to preserve secrets and fitted with self-destruct mechanisms to frustrate expropriation;
- the facility would grow in stages as and when demand required it.



Ali Larijani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) of Iran, and one of the two representatives of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei. He is Iran's chief negotiator on issues of national security, including Iran's nuclear program.

Several risks are associated with the proposal:

- the Iranians would learn (if they had not already discovered for themselves) how to operate a large-ish enrichment facility;
- for the reasons given above, it would be very difficult for the Iranians to run a separate clandestine operation and this being so, it is unlikely that they would try; but theoretically the risk (which applies to any scheme whatever) cannot be totally excluded;
- the Iranians would be in a position to carry through a violent form of "break out", that is to expropriate by main force a large modern enrichment plant and once in control of that resource, they should in principle be able to produce in a matter of months the necessary amount of HEU for a bomb. However, as indicated above, a pilot plant represents roughly the same risk.

If it occurred, the first risk would be of minor importance comparatively speaking. The second risk is unlikely. The third risk, expropriation, if it occurred would be very serious. However, for the following reasons it is unlikely to occur. If the Iranians are determined to make a nuclear weapon it would be less risky to continue to prevaricate and avoid an agreement or alternatively, to adopt the pilot plant proposal than blatantly to seize the property of foreign (and powerful) governments. Doing so would add a great deal of injury to the crime of making a weapon and would ensure a tough response. Besides it would be tantamount to a public announcement of their intention to make a weapon. No state has chosen to do this: all states aiming to make nuclear weapons have striven to present the international community with a fait accompli. Accordingly, the significant risk is limited to the possibility of expropriation, a big risk if it occurred but a small one in that it is unlikely.

Conclusions

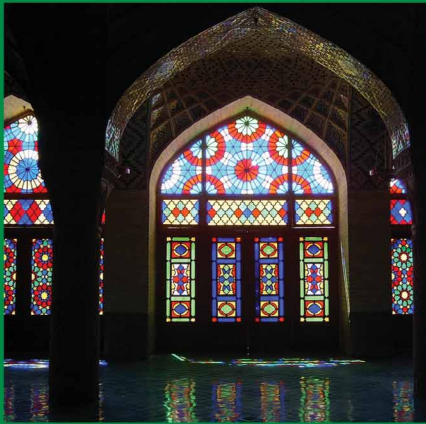
A complete analysis (beyond the scope of this paper) should consider the range of Iranian proposals, some of which are moderate. Perhaps the biggest risk of all is that the two sides, mired in distrust and hostility, will miss each and every opportunity to reach an accommodation. The consequence could be that all our fears about nuclear weapons, Islamic extremism, the stability of moderate regimes, the future of Israel and the security of energy supplies are given enhanced substance.

Western leaders are running a race with Iranian scientists. Yet the West admits that its methods are slow, uncertain, likely to cause moderate Iranians to yearn for a nuclear deterrent and certain to confront the nationalism of a proud people. If the Iranian scientists emulate their Indian, Pakistani, Brazilian and other counterparts, they will achieve “technical mastery”. At that point, the West by its own definition will have lost. More seriously, it will then be in a lot worse position than at present to prevent Iran from making nuclear weapons. Unless, of course, the West undertakes extreme military action such as may roil the world for a generation. This degree of risk-taking signals a policy made in the White House, not in European capitals. Mr. Bush may yet get to make the decision he prefers.

Perhaps the biggest risk of all is that the two sides, mired in distrust and hostility, will miss each and every opportunity to reach an accommodation.

Endnotes

- 1 In a recent interview reported by David Ignatius in the Washington Post of February 23, 2007, Undersecretary of State R. Nicholas Burns said “We are hopeful that all these pressure points will influence the internal debate in Iran”.
- 2 In the same Washington Post interview, R. Nicholas Burns said of the proposed new Security Council resolution drafted after discussion with the Russians and Chinese, “It may not be substantially stronger, but it will be stronger”.
- 3 This is true both of the conditions under which the West, especially the US would agree to talk with the Iranians and of the ultimate objective. At one level, the position is no talks unless there is a verified unilateral suspension of all enrichment-related activities in Iran, but there are different interpretations of “enrichment-related activities”. At another level the word goes out that a double suspension would be enough: “suspend enrichment in exchange for the suspension of UN sanctions”. (David Ignatius, Washington Post, February 23, 2007). Sometimes what is “intolerable” is the Iranians “mastering the technology”, sometimes the continued enrichment of uranium even if only to 5%, sometimes obtaining a “bomb”.
- 4 First editorial in Financial Times, January 22, 2007
- 5 Harvey Morris in Financial Times, January 16, 2007
- 6 Mark Mazzetti in The New York Times, January 20, 2007
- 7 For example, see David E. Sanger, The New York Times, February 24, 2007, “No one has defined where the red line is that we can't let the Iranians step over, one senior official said”.
- 8 The Iranians (as members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty) currently accept the basic level of safeguards required by the Treaty, a level which ensures there is no way they can enrich uranium beyond 5% or recycle low-enriched uranium without the inspectors knowing about it. Experience, primarily with Iraq, led the IAEA to introduce an additional level of inspection (called the Additional Protocol) permitting inspectors to roam the country in search of unauthorized facilities. While avoiding ratification of the Additional Protocol, the Iranians voluntarily accepted it in practice until negotiations with the West broke down in early 2006. Then they ceased to accept the additional inspections thus depriving the West of its most reliable means of discovering potential clandestine activities. Iranian ratification of the Additional Protocol would be the greatest security we can have that whatever might have been the case in the past, Iran is not or no longer pursuing a weapons program.



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By Sir John Thomson,
Former UK Ambassador to the UN

This discussion paper is a risk assessment of current Western policy towards Iran. The West is staking everything on an outcome – the permanent or at least indefinite suspension of enrichment by Iran – which the Iranians see as contrary to their national interests and are determined to resist. The objective of no nuclear weapons in Iranian hands is still possible – but time is running out. The author discusses three options for breaking the impasse: 'mothballing'; 'pilot plant' and 'multilateral enrichment'.

These Discussion Papers are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context. The views expressed in them are those of the authors and not necessarily those of BASIC, its staff, trustees or funders.

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About BASIC's project on preventive engagement with Iran

Many people believe that Iran is cultivating a threshold nuclear weapon status by developing the essential infrastructure to enrich uranium. Best estimates suggest that Iran is several years and possibly a decade away from any potential nuclear weapon. This allows the international community time to prevent any possible acquisition through targeted diplomacy or 'preventive engagement'.

This project addresses the policy challenges arising from the path to a credible and sustainable solution to the crisis surrounding Iran's nuclear program. It is our belief that such a solution will require the underlying U.S.-Iranian hostility to be addressed; Iran's security needs to be met; and its desire to be treated as a responsible international player respected.

This discussion paper series is part of our commitment to provide accurate and timely information and analysis on Iran's nuclear program and its international legal and geopolitical context. For more about this project visit: www.basicint.org

The project also publishes Iran Update, a free weekly email news and comment digest on the diplomatic movements over Iran's nuclear program. Read current and back issues at: www.basicint.org/updates/iran.htm

