

THE THREAT OF A NUCLEAR IRAN



Few foreign policy and national security issues have dominated debate in the United States and abroad as Iran's nuclear program has.

Most experts agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose real risks to stability and security in the region, if not lead to war between Iran and either its Arab neighbors or Israel. The challenge of how to contain and roll back Iran's developing nuclear weapon capability has confounded policy makers and international diplomats, who have passed now five United Nations Security Council resolutions calling on Iran to forgo its uranium enrichment efforts. The stakes could not be higher.

The Iranian Nuclear Program began in the 1950s. Following the Iranian Revolution, the clerical regime scaled back the civic nuclear program and focused on nuclear weapons capabilities. From the late 1980s through the 90s Iran invested heavily in building a full-scale nuclear program and an array of nuclear partners. Today, Iran has a robust nuclear infrastructure with a well organized and well educated nuclear program. The pursuit of nuclear weapons is driven by security concerns, especially over Israel and the U.S. Furthermore, domestic politics have led to a nuclear permissiveness, which the Iranian leadership has seized and used to drive forward the program. Today Iran constitutes the most enigmatic and problematic nuclear proliferation problem in the world. A nuclear armed Iran would change the security environment of the greater Persian Gulf region, in addition to the global security environment. The Islamic Republic of Iran's nearly twenty-year secret nuclear program was exposed by an exile group in 2002, and subsequently confirmed by inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Nuclear Proliferation

Iran is rapidly overcoming technical obstacles and significantly increasing its uranium enrichment capabilities. According to the February 19, 2009 report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Iran has enough low-enriched uranium (1,100 kg) to make one atomic bomb—at least theoretically. Iran already has exhausted most of its stock of uranium concentrate, known as yellow cake, in order to produce 357 metric tons of uranium hexafluoride at its facility at Isfahan. This is far from sufficient for a power program but is enough feed material for at least three dozen weapons. A key U.S. policy challenge is how to build a barrier between the latent nuclear weapons capability and actual weapons production. This is difficult when, in Iran's case today, the distinction is blurred almost to the point of invisibility.

With the release of a November 16, 2009 report from the IAEA, the following conclusions were drawn by U.S. officials:

- Iran's disclosure of a previously secret nuclear facility hidden in a mountainside in Qom raises questions about the existence of other such facilities.
- The site appeared designed to produce about a ton of enriched uranium a year -- enough for the production of one nuclear bomb a year but not enough to fuel a nuclear power plant.
- Commercially available satellite imagery of the site indicated that there had been construction at the site between 2002 and 2004, and that construction activities were resumed in 2006 and had continued to date.

- Iran remains bound by terms of a 2003 agreement under which it is obligated to provide information to the IAEA regarding nuclear facilities as soon as the decision to build is made or the construction authorized.

Nuclear Arms Race

The prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and obtaining the ability to launch missiles against countries throughout the Middle East and even Europe has alarmed the international community. Since 2006, 15 countries in the Middle East have announced new or revived plans to explore civilian nuclear energy. They have justified their interest in terms of electricity needs, energy diversification, a desire to conserve oil and gas for export earnings, and the role of nuclear energy in retarding global warming. They do not talk openly about it in strategic terms and do not say they want nuclear energy as the building block for an atomic bomb, but they do see nuclear energy as a status symbol and a way to keep technological pace with Iran. If Iran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, this will shift the balance of power in the Middle East, specifically in the oil-rich Gulf region, thereby dangerously destabilizing world oil markets.

International efforts to deter Iran from continuing its quest for nuclear weapons

U.S. efforts to synchronize its policies with the European Union in pressing for tougher sanctions and diplomacy against Iran have achieved some success in the last year. But the trade void is being filled by other nations, particularly Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. In order for sanctions to be successful, these nations need to participate fully, especially since financial sanctions are necessary for diplomacy to work. In November, 2009, there were new signs that Russia may be starting to lose patience with Iran, with delays mounting in the delivery of long-established contracts to provide sophisticated weaponry and civilian nuclear technology to the Islamic Republic. The Russian Energy Minister announced that there will be yet another delay in the completion of Bushehr, a \$1-billion civilian atomic power plant that the Russians have been building in southern Iran since 1995. Russia also refused to fulfill a contract to deliver the S-300, an advanced missile system that can take down high-flying aircraft at a range of nearly 100 miles. Together with the short-range Tor-M1 anti-aircraft missiles that Russia supplied two years ago the new rockets could make Iran feel immune to military threats and therefore more stubborn in its resistance to international pressure over its nuclear program.

Locally investors have been doing their part as well. In June of 2009, New York State's retirement fund announced it will divest from nine companies doing business in Iran. Most states have passed legislation which divests state pension investment from Iran. Bob Haynes, head of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, also voiced support for legislation in Massachusetts. "There ought to be a moral code related to pension investments," he said. On a national level, AFL-CIO President James Hoffa started urging the union's pensions funds to shed all shares they own in companies doing business in Iran in 2007.



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