

Iranian Nuclear Programme... Has The Countdown To Military Confrontation Begun?



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Abstract

This study provides an interpretation of the developments of the nuclear program after the American-Iranian talks, which were held in Baghdad on 28 May 2007. The study also addresses the impact of the regional and international developments on the negotiations between Iran and the European Union, and between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency. It also sheds light on the various positions towards the Iranian nuclear program and examines the proposed solutions.

The study presents some evidence to the effect that the general political mood in the region is pushing toward escalation, perhaps even a limited military confrontation.

Introduction

In July 2007, the UN Security Council is expected to start discussing the report of the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which was submitted to the Council in late May of the same year. This follows a meeting between Ali Larijani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, and Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, on 23 June 2007, in Lisbon. This meeting in turn follows a meeting between Larijani and Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Larijani-Solana meeting is of particular importance given the regional and international developments that took place after their last meeting in Madrid. Among these developments are the American-Iranian meeting in Baghdad, the four-hour meetings between the two countries' ambassadors, the split which is reportedly widening within the American administration over how to deal with Iran and the growing violence in Iraq, which has led to increasing American casualties.

The negotiations between the EU representative and Iran have focused since the first day on the issue of uranium enrichment. The prevailing belief in the European Union countries, and the United States, is that Iran is enriching uranium in quantities exceeding what Iran describes as its necessary needs to produce energy. Europeans and Americans are more convinced now that the Iranian nuclear project has military ambitions, otherwise, why did it conceal its program for eighteen years? Thereupon, all the submitted proposals -by different parties- have focused on the idea that cessation of uranium enrichment is the key step to start a serious dialogue to peacefully resolve the Iranian nuclear issue.

Under President Mohammad Khatami, Iran unilaterally announced in 2004, the suspension of uranium enrichment, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad decided to suspend this initiative, and called for resuming uranium enrichment.

Proposals on the Table

There are now four proposals on the table regarding the Iranian nuclear program, each with a different approach to the crucial issue of uranium enrichment. The Iranian proposal affirms the peaceful nature of the nuclear program, and stresses Iran's right, in this context, to resume uranium enrichment, emphasizing at the same time its willingness to accept the additional protocol on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, known as 93+2.

Iran believes it has proved its good intentions and that it does not seek to possess nuclear weapons when it announced, in 2004, suspension of all uranium enrichment activities. The Paris Agreement between representatives of the EU governments (German, French and British) and Iran, signed in 15 November 2004, affirmed this suspension¹. European countries promised to offer what they call economic incentives, which Iran rejected. Iran also emphasizes that it does not object to the participation of international companies in uranium enrichment, in an attempt to create an atmosphere of transparency and clarity to reassure those countries skeptical of the Iranian nuclear program.

The second proposal is that of both the European Union and the United States, which requires Iran to completely stop uranium enrichment in exchange for a promise by the European countries of serious negotiations with Iran. In light of this proposal, European countries offered the two packages of economic incentives in June 2005 and August 2006. It is well known that Iran has rejected these two proposals.

The third proposal was presented by Russia and backed by Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Under this proposal, the international community would allow Iran to conduct limited uranium enrichment in exchange for refraining from producing highly enriched uranium on an industrial scale, i.e. in quantities sufficient for military use. Iran rejected this proposal, saying that the decision to enrich uranium is a matter of national sovereignty, and no one should interfere in this matter.

It seems that the long Russian-Iranian relationship and the close cooperation between the two countries has not been enough to persuade Iran to accept the Russian proposal. For its part, Russia was disappointed with Iran's position, which, it says, further complicates the whole Iranian issue. This Iranian refusal was apparently the reason behind the change in the Russian position and its reduced opposition to the resolutions 1737 and 1747², which angered Iran and provoked a crisis in the relationship between the two countries. This was evident in the delay in the completion of Bushehr Reactor, which was supposed to be launched in September 2007- after a delay of more than 7 years.

The last proposal was presented by Switzerland, which calls for simultaneous suspension of Iran's nuclear activities and UN sanctions and any steps aimed to issue a new resolution from the UN Security Council on new sanctions against Iran. This proposal emphasizes the need to begin serious talks to reach a serious and lasting solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

1- Iran agrees to nuclear curb, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 14 November 2004

2- Resolutions 1737 and 1747, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8928.doc.htm> <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc8980.doc.htm>

Iran welcomed the proposal, but the United States and the European Union countries insisted that Iran should suspend its uranium enrichment first, which led to shelving the proposal. What is clear so far is that these proposals face objections from one or another player in the Iranian nuclear crisis. It seems clear that the political dimension of the nuclear programme, which is associated with Iran's foreign policy, remains the present-absent issue in this file. Therefore, it is important to consider all the regional developments in order to see the direction into which these developments are leading.

Regional and International Developments... Toward Which Direction?

The growing violence in Iraq and the increasing Iranian presence in the Iraqi political arena¹ are strongly pushing toward greater use of the nuclear bargaining chip to pressure Iran. For Iranians, the Iranian-American talks in May 2007 consolidated the gains achieved by the Islamic Republic in the post-Saddam Iraq. The four-hour talks in Baghdad between Washington and Tehran was an attempt by each party to read the other's thoughts, especially now that the United States is convinced of the need for Iran's intervention to achieve relative security and stability in Iraq. Although the Iranian-American talks focused only on Iraq, Iran did not forget the crisis of its nuclear program and the US desire to exert more pressure on Iran to force it to abandon its nuclear program.²

The split, which the American circles are talking about, in the American administration over how to deal with the nuclear program is reminiscent of the atmosphere of Baghdad talks. Those who are pushing for a more diplomacy-centred approach argue that more time is needed to form a coalition against Iran. In addition, for the United States, more time means Iran will commit more mistakes, which can be used to mobilize regional and international community against Iran. Therefore, this trend eventually leads to the same direction of those who push for a military solution. This strategy seems to be succeeding, especially in view of the growing violence in Iraq, the increasing evidence of weapons exports to Iran and the training and support provided by Iran to these groups.

It suffices here to point to the reports that affirm the Iranian support for Mahdi Army (which, according to the British sources, is responsible for the kidnapping of five Britons from the Iraqi Ministry of Trade and Industry) and the talk about providing Mahdi Army with Surface to Air Missiles, which were used to shoot down a British helicopter in Basra.³ Moreover, there is the talk about the Iranian support for Taliban in Afghanistan, which may leave undesirable effects on Iran's relations with the Afghan and Pakistani governments. The issue of forcing thousands of Afghans to leave Iran, considered by the Afghan governments and human rights organizations as unacceptable, dominates the relationship between Kabul and Tehran. The Afghan government feels that Iran did not respect its mediation efforts to postpone sending these refugees to their homeland. On the other hand, Iranian support for Taliban, as is alleged by British and American sources, will infuriate Pakistan, which made military and intelligence efforts to eliminate Taliban from the Afghan political scene. Pakistan also believes that the return of Taliban would necessarily mean the failure of its efforts in the war on terrorism. The issue is further exacerbated by Iran's connections to Hamas (which has recently established control of Gaza) and the growing violence and political disruption in Lebanon. These developments will cast a long shadow on any possibility to solve the Iranian nuclear issue.

1 Zweiri, Mahjoob: Iran's Presence in Iraq: New Realities? <http://www.jcss.org/UploadEvents/69.pdf>, 14 May 2007

2 Zweiri, Mahjoob: American-Iranian Talks on Iraq.. End of Conflict or another Start? <http://www.jcss.org/UploadEvents/74.pdf>, 31 May 2007

3 Iran Supplied missile that hit UK Helicopter, www.timesonline.co.uk, 24 June 2007

The evaluation of these developments and the talk about the third resolution to impose new sanctions does not bode well for solving this issue diplomatically. This pessimism is further increased by the failure of the regional and international diplomacy to solve the intense conflicts in the Middle East for more than five decades. Perhaps the three wars in this part of the world demonstrate the depth of the crisis and the difficulties faced by any diplomatic effort to solve the increasing crises in the region.

Painful Sanctions Resolution

It seems that what John Bolton, the former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, said- that Iran will face “painful” sanctions if it continues to defy the international community- is starting to be implemented. Information received from the G8 industrial summit, which was held in June in Germany, confirms that there is an agreement on a new European sanctions resolution, which concentrates on preventing Iranian ships and planes from traveling to European capitals. The resolution imposes further restrictions on the travel of Iranian officials to European capitals. European countries seek to attract the support of strong Asian powers, such as India, Japan, China and Russia, to close the doors in the face of Iran in case it resorted to Asia to thwart the resolution.

This resolution aims at paralyzing the Iranian economy and imposing more political isolation on Tehran. This sanctions resolution is associated with the political changes, which brought to the power conservative governments in both France and Germany, which share the United States its concern about the Iranian nuclear program. It seems that pushing through this resolution is associated with the clarifications that Javier Solana requested from Ali Larijani in Lisbon meeting in June 2007. These clarifications- which will be obtained by the Nuclear Energy Agency that will visit Tehran in the first half of July 2007- focus on how Iran obtained the centrifuges used to separate plutonium P3, where Iran’s production of it goes, and the degree of progress made by Tehran in this area.

This sanctions resolution comes in a time when there is increased talk about a similar British resolution, which started to be discussed on 16 June 2007. all this may imply that Britain derived the general ideas from the G8 meeting and formulated them. This is not the first time Britain submits a sanctions resolution against Iran. The resolution 1747 was submitted by Britain, but was amended due to the pressures from the other Security Council members .¹

What is stated so far is that the ideas included in this resolution might be an alternative to any extended military action. Therefore, European countries hope that the international circles will accept and support it. Nevertheless, the impact of this on any progress achieved by Iranians before these sanctions remains an open question, and also its impact on the Iranian people. The Israeli reaction is no less important also, since Israel considers the Iranian nuclear program a threat to its security and existence.

It should also be noted that discussing the issue of tightening the sanctions on non-American firms to prevent them from investing in the Iranian energy sector is among the issues on the American Congress agenda. Under this law, the White House is obliged to punish the European and Japanese firms that continue investing in Iran. The resolution points to the broad economic activity of the Revolutionary Guard forces, describing them as a terrorist organization. This resolution enjoys the support of both Republicans and Democrats .²

¹ UK plan may stifle Tehran oil Exports, www.gulf-times.com, 27 June 2007

² www.bbc.co.uk/persian/Iran, 27 June 2007

Evidences of the Imminent Confrontation

While Iranian officials warn against the repercussions of imposing a new embargo on Iran, confrontation between Iran from one side and the United States and the European nations on the other seems more imminent than expected. This may not necessarily be a military confrontation, and at least in the beginning it is likely to start with "painful" sanctions-as John Bolton puts it- imposed by the West and its allies in the world. But things will not stop there. The third sanctions resolution, if passed in this form, will undoubtedly paralyze Iran's economy and politics, but it must not be understood that this will happen before the winter of 2007. The draft resolution must go through many stages before entering in force.

Perhaps the most important step after passing any sanctions resolution is for member states in the United Nations to commit to implementing the resolution, and agree on how to do that. According to Belgium's UN Ambassador, Chairman of the Committee overseeing the implementation of Security Council embargo resolutions, many countries were late in reporting to the Security Council on the nature of their role and their commitment to implement Security Council resolutions 1737 and 1747¹, which impose different levels of embargo on Iran. Belgium's Ambassador affirmed that 40% of Security Council member states officially informed the committee overseeing the implementation of the embargo of their commitment to the resolutions that prevent selling Iran any goods or technology that can be used in the Iranian nuclear project, and refrain from receiving the officials associated with the Iranian nuclear program.

According to American and western interpretation, such delay in implementation means an additional opportunity for Iran to achieve further progress in its nuclear program, which strengthens the hypothesis that imposing "painful" sanctions is not enough, and that perhaps limited military action should be considered as an option.

There seems to be some evidence- which reflect the general political mood- that suggest that finding a political solution for the crisis is not possible. What makes thing worse are the defiant declarations by Tehran. For example, western media used the statements of Iranian Interior Minister, that Iran has 100 kilos of enriched uranium, to strengthen its conviction that Iran's nuclear program is of a military nature. Although Iranian authorities denied that, the political and security committees operating in the United States and Europe have taken this declaration very seriously². Such western response is, as such, an evidence that the West and the United States look suspiciously and skeptically at the Iranian nuclear program.

The other evidence that should be highlighted is Israel. Reports state that Israel began conducting military exercises with the United States to fly long military flights. It seems that the aim of these flights is to hit Iranian nuclear facilities when the zero-hour comes. This coincides with the launch of Israel's new Ofeq-7 satellite on June 2007, which is capable of detecting objects as small as 70 centimeters on the ground. It is thought that this satellite orbits over Iran and Syria every 90 minutes.

The United States is also studying very seriously the possibility of withdrawing 50% of its forces from Iraq by 2008. It is believed that the final American assessment of Baghdad Security Plan, which will be conducted in September 2007, will set an earlier date for withdrawing these forces, provided that the rest of forces be deployed in military bases previously agreed upon between the Iraqi government and the United States. On another front, American forces were amassed in the area of Basra Airport to reduce the chances of exposure to possible attacks.

1 Resolutions 1737 and 1747, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8928.doc.htm> <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc8980.doc.htm>

2 Iran Takes step nearer to a nuclear bomb, www.telegraph.co.uk, 23 June 2007

On the economic front, it was pointed out that some procedures undertaken by the United Arab Emirates and Iran reflect the anxiety of a possible imminent confrontation. The UAE is investing \$2 billion in wells for gas storage, in order to cope with any possible closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Abu Dhabi seeks to build a pipeline to transport approximately 1.6 million barrels of oil to Fujairah, located at the other side of the Strait of Hormuz, so that oil tankers will not need to transit the Strait of Hormuz, which might be threatened in view of the growing escalation between the United States and Iran .¹

Iran, for its part, is seriously considering the setting up of an oil investment fund in Dubai or Bahrain, in order to confront the threat of harsh economic embargo. This financing fund will focus on financing any development or expansion in South Pars Gas Field. It will also provide Iran with the needed capital to increase its production of crude oil one million barrels per day. It is thought that this financing will come from Iranian private capital, estimated at about \$200 billion, in Dubai and other centers in the Gulf .²

Iran also strengthened its military presence specifically in the Strait of Hormuz. It was reported that the Revolutionary Guard sent 1000 military vessels which are stationed 34 Km of the Strait. The fast military vessels carry Cruise missiles, mines, torpedoes and RPG weapons. The length of the vessels is 23 meters at speed of 100 km/h³ . This Iranian step seems to be a warning to the American forces in the Gulf; Iran can use these vessels to threaten the naval forces in the Gulf. It will also pose a threat to oil tankers, which have to cross the Strait to transport oil to the world markets.

On another front, the issue of the Iranian nuclear program was briefly discussed during the visit of the American Vice President, Dick Cheney, to Karachi in February 2007. The American Administration has requested additional information on the nature of data provided by Abdul Qadir Khan's network to Iran. Pakistan was informed that the United States will stop its support to the anti-Pervez Musharraf political powers ,⁴ if Karachi supports Washington in any possible military action against Iran.

On another front, the delay in launching Bushehr reactor and the worsened Russian-Iranian relations have implications. Russia, which says that the delay is the result of Iran's failure to fulfill its financial obligations, feels disappointed with the Iranian intransigence. It was also hoping that Iran would accept its proposal, submitted in 2005, to enrich uranium in Russia.

1 www.iran-emrooz.net, 22 June 2007

2 Iran may look elsewhere for oil funds, www.kazakhstannews.net, 24 June 2007

3 www.worldtribune.com, 22 June 2007

4 www.iran-emrooz.net, 22 June 2007

Is There Any Way Out?

The question remains open whether or not there is still a peaceful way out of this crisis. It seems that a simple answer of yes or no is not easy. Yet, the time seems right to ask about the expectations of each party in this confrontation, and about the price that each will pay to take difficult decision and make concessions, thus reaching a political settlement to solve this crisis.

Iran -until the time of writing this analysis- is not willing to waive what it calls its enrichment right. It says that it is ready to offer whatever guarantees to reassure the European countries that its nuclear program is of a peaceful nature. But such soft policy in dealing with the West needs to be explained and justified to those conservative hardliners and critical reformists in the Iranian political arena. In addition, what is the price Iran will get from all this if its nuclear program is peaceful? True, Iran wants security guarantees, but can the European Union, Russia and China offer such guarantees? And will these guarantees be convincing and sufficient if they were given without the American participation? How will the United States feel reassured about what Tehran describes as the incessant American threat to its security through supporting some intellectuals and leaders of civil society to prepare the so-called "velvet revolution" to pave the way to a regime change in Iran? Is Iran willing to give up its achievements in the Iraqi political arena? Will Iran be willing to stop supporting what it calls "resistance movements" in the region?

On the other hand, is the United States willing to give Iran these security guarantees while Iran- from the American point of view- obstructs US policies in the region? Is the nuclear programme the only pending issue between Iran and the United States and western countries? How will the United States justify any lenient policy towards Iran or any concession that it may offer to Iran, especially to its friends in the region, particularly Israel, which considers its security part of the American national security? It suffices here to point to the recent report of the American National Security Council, which considers Iran the main threat to the American national security and the American interests.

Conclusion

These tidal waves of developments in the Iranian nuclear program reflect the internal conflicts and the different political interpretations in the domestic politics of both Washington and Tehran. Therefore, it is necessary to seriously study these conflicts, because at some stage they will be the incentive for reaching a diplomatic solution or a military one.

The international mobilization for any confrontation will focus on the expansive national dimension of Iranian interests in the Middle East region, in the context of the recent resurgence of Shi'ite politics in Iraq and the region as a whole. Such strategy will be useful in the framework of the Arab Middle East and the Sunni Middle East. As for the United States, the focus will be on the threat Iran poses to Israel and energy sources in the Gulf, in addition to the threat to the "American democratization project in the new Middle East".

Finally, the willingness of the parties of the conflict to make concessions in an atmosphere free of mistrust and prejudgments may help in reaching a settlement. Yet, lack of such willingness means the beginning of the countdown to a confrontation the effects of which will be felt in the region and across the world!