Making the Right Call: How the World Can Limit Iran's Nuclear Program

Before Tehran achieves mastery of enriching uranium, which would give Iran the potential to make nuclear weapons, Washington and its allies should swallow hard and offer Iran a multilateral dialogue involving the United States that would seriously address Iranian security concerns and provide substantial economic incentives. In exchange, Tehran would have to agree to verifiable restraints on its nuclear program, including a cessation of its uranium-enrichment program. If Iran rejects this generous offer, the United States would then be in a stronger position to form a coalition to enforce tough, multilateral economic sanctions.

Understanding the Nature of the Iranian Regime

From the outset, it must be emphasized that the bewildering array of political factions that constitute the Islamic Republic’s governing elite have united on building up the peaceful nuclear program while maintaining the option of crossing the weapons threshold. Contrary to the usual pattern of a polarized Iran, the nuclear issue has transcended the divisions and rivalries within the state and is driven by a national consensus. However, the Islamic Republic is not an irrational rogue seeking the potential for such weaponry as an instrument of an aggressive, revolutionary foreign policy designed to project its power abroad. This would not be an “Islamic bomb” to be handed over to terrorist organizations or exploded in the streets of New York City or Washington. For the theocratic oligarchs, this would be a weapon of deterrence, as they seek a means of ensuring regime security and Iran’s territorial integrity.

It is tempting to attribute Iran’s defiant stance to the rise of a new reactionary regime, but the hardening of Iran’s per se effective on the nuclear issue predated the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who took office in August 2005 and has since infuriated the international community with his incendiary denials of the Holocaust. The previous reformist government decided to restart operations at the Isfahan uranium-conversion plant last August and loudly complained that negotiations with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom were proving inadequate. In the end, both reformers and hard-liners arrived at the conclusion that the European diplomacy was ill serving Iran’s interests. After nearly two and a half years of suspension of its program, Iran neither obtained the type of security and economic concessions that North Korea may garner, nor did it generate sustained European opposition to U.S. attempts to coerce and isolate Iran.

Nonetheless, Iran’s nuclear calculations have been somewhat altered by the rise of Ahmadinejad to
political power. For the new president and his allies, it is not so much the original revolution that launched the Islamic Republic but the prolonged war with Iraq in the 1980s that has defined their strategic assumptions. Even a cursory examination of Ahmadinejad’s speeches reveals that for him the war is far from a faded memory. In his defiant speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2005, he pointedly admonished the assembled dignitaries for their failings:

For eight years, [Saddam Hussein’s] regime imposed a massive war of aggression against my people. It employed the most heinous weapons of mass destruction (WMD) including chemical weapons against Iranians and Iraqis alike. Who, in fact, armed Saddam with those weapons? What was the reaction of those who claim to fight against WMDs regarding the use of chemical weapons then?[1]

The international indifference to Hussein’s war crimes and Tehran’s lack of an effective response have led Iran’s war veteran turned president to perceive that the security of his country cannot be predicated on global opinion and international treaties. Moreover, after nearly three decades of acrimony and tension, the younger generation of Iranian hard-liners perceives that conflict with the United States is inevitable and that the only manner of deterring an aggressive United States is through possession of the “strategic weapon.” Such perceptions were ironically reinforced by the 2003 U.S.-led Iraqi invasion, as the Bush administration’s belief that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons did not deter it from military intervention. The arch-conservative Kayhan newspaper, which acts as the mouthpiece of Ahmadinejad’s government, stressed this point, noting, “All we have to do is look at Iraq to see what happens to a country that cannot defend itself.”[2] Although today the United States may seem entangled in an Iraqi quagmire that tempers its ambitions, for Iran’s rulers, America is still an aggressive state whose power cannot be discounted and whose intentions must not be trusted. Despite their bitterness and cynicism, the theocratic hard-liners are eternal optimists when it comes to how the international community might respond to an Iranian nuclear breakout. Many influential conservative voices insist that Iran would follow the model of India and Pakistan, namely, that the initial international outcry would soon be followed by acceptance of Iran’s new status. Thus, Tehran would regain its commercial contracts and keep its nuclear weapons. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati noted this theme when stressing that, “[w]henever we stand firm and defend our righteous stands resolutely, they are forced to retreat and have no alternatives.”[3] The notion of Iran’s mischievous past and its tense relations with the United States militating against the acceptance of its nuclear status by the international community is rejected by the right. The Bush administration’s discursive nuclear diplomacy has only validated such perceptions. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington was all too eager to absolve Pakistan of its nuclear sins for sake of its tentative and limited cooperation in the war against terrorism. This past July, the administration also proposed rewarding and essentially welcoming India to the “nuclear club” with a full civil nuclear cooperation agreement despite New Delhi’s snubbing of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Given these steps, it is difficult to make the case that Washington’s policy is seriously motivated by preventing proliferation and that the Bush administration is concerned about halting the spread of nuclear technologies. However, should they be proved wrong and Iran become subject to sanctions, the hard-liners are willing to pay that price for an important national prerogative. Ahmadinejad has pointedly noted that even if sanctions were to be imposed, “the Iranian nation would still have its rights.”[4] In a similar vein, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the Guardian Council, has noted, “We do not welcome sanctions, but if we are threatened by sanctions, we will not give in.”[5]

The notion of the need to sacrifice and struggle on behalf of the revolution and resist imperious international demands is an essential tenet of the hard-liners’ ideological perspective.

Still, in Iran’s complex political system the president does not make all the security decisions, as the ultimate authority rests in the hands of the enigmatic supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. As a hard-liner himself, Khamenei’s instincts would be to support the reactionary elements in their call for defiance and pursuit of the nuclear option. How ever, in his role as the guardian of the state, he must consider the nuclear program in the context of Iran’s international relations. Thus far, regardless of his ideological compunctions, Khamenei has opted for restraint. In fact, Iran suspended its nuclear
program for more than two years and still continues its commitment to the core components of the NPT. Ahmadinejad’s acceptance of the negotiations despite his campaign rhetoric reflects his willingness to accede to the direction set out by Khamenei.

In such a dynamic and uncertain political environment, the levers of threats or security reassurances that the United States and its allies decide to pull will have a profound effect. Determining what that effect will be, however, can be difficult. Importantly, Iranian leaders tend to make their most dramatic changes in policy when their rhetoric is most uncompromising. Ironically, the recent escalation of rhetoric might signal a policy shift soon to come.

Heading to the Brink?

Nevertheless, after everything that has taken place, the one thing that can be assumed with certainty is that Iran is determined to advance its nuclear program and systematically reverse its commitments to the European Union to halt progress in its nuclear program in return for potential economic and security benefits. However, this is not to suggest that Iran will brashly dispense with its NPT obligations and launch a crash program designed to construct nuclear weapons.

The demands of the United States and the European powers exceed the mandates of the NPT. The NPT does offer member states the right to enrich uranium so long as they adhere to the safeguard provisions and openly declare their facilities. Iran’s rejection of its voluntary commitments to the EU, however serious, is not the same as dispensing with the NPT. Iran may be ruled by hard-liners, but it is still a cautious power that will calibrate its moves on the level of international pressure and the conduct of external powers. It is possible that Tehran is testing the limits of what it can do with its nuclear program before the United States and its allies decide to enact meaningful sanctions, or seeking to increase its leverage for future talks.

Nonetheless, the Jan. 10 removal of IAEA seals from Iran’s uranium-enrichment facilities, the February IAEA vote, the subsequent decision by Tehran to suspend its voluntary adherence to the agency’s Model Additional Protocol and to restart uranium enrichment, as well as tough statements by some Iranian and Western leaders, move all players in this high stakes nuclear game closer to the brink. Staying on the current course, there will soon come a point where a real crisis will erupt. Barring a decision by Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities again, the next probable step on the escalation ladder would involve a Security Council resolution in March to reinforce the February IAEA resolution that Iran “extend full and prompt cooperation” to the IAEA and “clarify possible activities which could have a military nuclear dimension.”

The United States has staked its reputation on sending Iran to the Security Council. The Bush administration favors a strategy that isolates and chastises Iran. This plan hinges on Iran’s desire not to become a pariah. Ali Larijani, Iran’s top nuclear negotiator, has recently indicated that Iran is open for talks with the United States, but Washington opposes direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic. At a Feb. 6 news briefing, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Robert Joseph said that the United States has “a number of fundamental problems with this Iranian regime, including terrorism and human rights, and I don’t think it’s now time that we sat down with them.”

The United States refuses to grant diplomatic recognition to Iran and fears that direct talks about the nuclear program would bestow legitimacy on Tehran without addressing Washington’s other concerns.

If the strategy of making Iran into a pariah does not work, what are the next possible steps in the present trajectory? Having painstakingly assembled a coalition of China, the EU, and Russia, the United States would likely be wary of shattering this fragile consensus. Although the United States has had sanctions against Iran for decades, the other members of the coalition have significant economic ties with Iran. In particular, China, as a fast-growing developing nation with a thirst for oil, has cut major oil deals with Tehran. Although Russia’s construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant has earned the Russian nuclear industry close to $1 billion in revenue, Moscow has more widespread economic and political interests at stake in Iran by cultivating it as a potential economic partner as well as a strategic partner, particularly in relation to problems in the Caucasus, such as Chechnya.

Still, faced with a continuing impasse on Iran’s nuclear activities, Washington could try to enlist
support for economic sanctions by making the case that bearing this burden is necessary to stop proliferation. Effective sanctions would have to be multilateral and enforceable and could target exports to Iran and foreign investments.\[9\]

The most powerful sanction would pull the oil embargo lever. For the time being, in a tight oil-supply market, this sanction appears unlikely to be used because the United States and the EU would not want to risk a substantial increase in the price of gasoline. If employed, however, such a sanction would cut both ways. Iran relies heavily on money from oil exports. The Iranian economy appears ill prepared to handle a blow dealt to this sector. A more targeted and smarter type of oil sanction would focus on Iranian gasoline imports. Because Iran is lacking in gasoline refining capacity, it imports more than 40 percent of its gasoline. The Iranian government also heavily subsidizes the price of gasoline so that consumers pay much less at the pump than they would without the subsidies.

Conventional thinking is that Russia and China, as veto-wielding members of the Security Council, have little or no appetite for sanctions. The United States would likely have to bargain with these countries to win their support.

Russia might be swayed by an incentives package that gave it a long-desired agreement for cooperation concerning the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Such an agreement could pave the way for Russia to receive U.S.-origin spent nuclear fuel from various countries for storage. Russia hopes to earn billions of dollars from offering this service. Moreover, this agreement could help President Vladimir Putin achieve his plans to transform the Russian nuclear industry into one of the world’s leaders in fuel and reactor services. Furthermore, an embargo of Iranian oil leading to higher prices could provide a windfall for Russia, a major oil exporter. Still, Moscow would likely resist imposing tough sanctions because it would want to preserve close commercial contacts with Iran even if Tehran crosses the nuclear weapons threshold.

Having China agree to sanctions seems a much tougher task than reaching agreement with Russia. China would most likely abstain when faced with a Security Council vote on sanctions, but it would have to be prepared to accept a council decision to impose them. China’s support, acquiescence, or opposition would depend strongly on whether the sanctions would significantly harm its economy.

If the credible threat or actual imposition of sanctions does not convince Iran to suspend its sensitive nuclear activities again, the next step on the escalation ladder could be the use of military force against Iran’s nuclear facilities, but this option is fraught with considerable risk. Having learned an important lesson from Israel’s 1981 bombing of Iraq’s Osiraq reactor, Tehran has dispersed its many nuclear facilities. It has also hardened and partially buried some of the most critical facilities, such as the commercial-scale uranium-enrichment plant under development at Natanz. Another complicating factor is finding out where all the facilities are located. Moreover, assembling a coalition of the willing currently appears extremely difficult to do, especially when the United Kingdom, the closest U.S. ally, has all but ruled out the military option for the near term. A military strike could try to destroy or degrade Iran’s nuclear program. Short of an all-out invasion, destroying the program appears extremely far-fetched. By contrast, degrading the program would be relatively straightforward but might not accomplish the ultimate aim of preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. Some bombs detonated, for example, on the enrichment facilities at Natanz would hamper Iran’s program. Likewise, some analysts have contemplated using sabotage and assassination as tools to slow Iran’s nuclear endeavors.\[10\]

Delaying the onset of a potential weapons program by years might be possible if enough damage is inflicted on Iran’s nuclear facilities. However, there is an equal and perhaps greater likelihood that this attack could motivate Iran to accelerate its nuclear program. Also, if Tehran had not already decided to build nuclear weapons, an attack would probably compel it to do so. Further more, Iran would almost certainly not feel restrained to stay within the NPT and would kick out IAEA inspectors. The United States and its allies would then confront a black box similar to what they experienced after UN weapons inspectors left Iraq in late 1998. In the Iraqi situation, the absence of inspectors over a four-year period of time fostered worst-case thinking and fears that Hussein had resurrected his nuclear program. Those fears were partially behind the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003. Three years later, the United States remains bogged down in Iraq with no clear endpoint in sight.

**Time for a New Approach**
Even if sanctions were employed or a military strike launched, the underlying motivations for an Iranian nuclear program would not have been addressed. Iranian thinking on the nuclear issue is shaped by external security concerns and internal politics. In the first set of factors, Tehran perceives threats from neighboring countries. Some observers have quipped that only Canada, Mexico, and Iran share extensive borders with the United States. Iranians see U.S. forces to the east in Afghanistan and to the west in Iraq. Iran also is located in a nuclear-armed neighborhood, with Israel, Pakistan, and Russia as well as China and India nearby.

In the second set of factors, pride and prestige influence Iranians in wanting fully to exercise their right to a nuclear program. Creating an indigenous nuclear industry could be perceived as a crowning achievement in a long history of Persian scientific accomplishments. The Iranian government has also made the nuclear program a major nationalist issue. It is inconceivable that an Iranian politician could run for office on a platform to negotiate away completely Iran’s ability to exercise its right to have an indigenous nuclear program.

Consequently, the need for a new approach to resolve the current impasse is urgent, taking into account Iranian perceptions of its security as well as pride about its nuclear program. This approach should address Iran’s security concerns. Successfully doing so would tend to undercut much but not all of the rationale for a nuclear weapons program.

To alleviate Iran’s fears of regime change imposed by the United States, President George W. Bush could pledge not to attack Iran as long as it did not acquire nuclear weapons or the capability to make those weapons. The administration, of course, would also want to keep open the option of militarily responding to an Iranian attack or a terrorist incident initiated by Tehran. As a further security assurance, Washington could offer to engage in talks about security concerns contingent on Iran meeting the conditions spelled out in the February IAEA resolution, such as ratifying and implementing an additional protocol, indefinitely suspending its uranium-enrichment activities, and reconsidering its work on a heavy-water research reactor that could make plutonium.

Although the United States currently opposes direct negotiations with Iran, the odious nature of a “rogue” regime did not stop Washington from negotiating an agreement with Tripoli to disarm its nuclear and chemical. The Libyan model of disarmament can be described as “tyranny without weapons of mass destruction,” with Libyan leader Colonel Moammar Gaddafi remaining in power. Similarly, the United States has embraced the six-party talks with North Korea to work toward a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. In the September 2005 round of talks, “the United States affirmed that it…has no intention to attack or invade [North Korea] with nuclear or conventional weapons.”[11] A comprehensive security-assurances approach should address the concern in the Middle East about Israel’s nuclear weapons. The time may be right to convince Israel to move toward greater transparency of its nuclear infrastructure. Israel could seize the opportunity presented by the plutonium production reactor at Dimona nearing its end of life. As a first step toward openness, Israel could announce that it will suspend operations at Dimona and place it under IAEA monitoring. A further step could involve Israel announcing that it is prepared to place some or all of its plutonium under watch by a nuclear-weapon state such as the United States. However, Israel would only carry out this activity once it is assured that other regional states, such as Egypt and Iran, would suspend work at their nuclear facilities, which can produce enough fissile material for one or more bombs every one to three years.[12]

These steps could build confidence to move toward a comprehensive nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East. Notably, the February IAEA resolution recognizes “that a solution to the Iranian issue would contribute to global nonproliferation efforts and to realizing the objective of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction, including their means of delivery.” From the perspective of the United States, it would be ideal to convince Iran to stop or at least suspend development of its nuclear program before it masters the key technologies to make nuclear-weapon materials. Such mastery could occur sooner than some recent assessments indicate. Last year, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate assessed that Iran may be up to 10 years away from acquiring a nuclear weapon.[13]

As Israeli officials have stressed, however, there are intermediate barriers that if crossed would likely constitute a technical point of no return, allowing Iran to enrich enough uranium to make its own weapon. Until now, Iran reportedly has been struggling to solve problems with both its uranium-conversion and -enrichment plants. The conversion plant has been producing uranium hexafluoride...
gas with too high a concentration of chemical contaminants, especially molybdenum. Uranium hexafluoride is the gas that is fed into the enrichment plant either to make low-enriched uranium for reactor fuel or highly enriched uranium (HEU) for weapons. U.S. technical experts assess that Iran would probably need months of independent work to produce clean uranium hexafluoride.[14]

Yet, if Iran received outside assistance, it could solve the impurity problem much faster. Moscow, for instance, has offered to enrich Iran’s uranium in order to provide Tehran with reactor fuel. Although the details of the potential deal remain uncertain, one variant of the deal would allow Iran to convert uranium into uranium hexafluoride. To ensure quality fuel is produced, Russia would have an incentive to aid Iran’s uranium-conversion program. Such assistance would unintentionally remove one of the main barriers to Iran’s mastery of uranium enrichment. Another worrisome aspect of a potential Russian deal could involve allowing Iran to continue research on enrichment. Regardless of any agreement with Moscow, however, Iranian officials have made clear that they are determined to pursue uranium enrichment.

The Way Forward

Can the Iranian nuclear Gordian knot be cut? We see three options to break through the current impasse.

1) Accept an Iranian nuclear program involving research-level uranium enrichment but try to offer Iran incentives not to develop an industrial-scale enrichment plant.

2) Keep ratcheting up the pressure on Iran and attempt to form a coalition that will enforce multilateral economic sanctions.

3) Create a security dialogue with Iran to lessen the perceived need for nuclear weapons.

The first option could keep Iran in a strategically ambiguous position and would worrisomely allow Iran to master weapons-usable nuclear technologies. This is presently unacceptable to the United States. If either increased incentives or increased disincentives do not work, however, the international community would be stuck with Iran for the coming years moving ahead with its enrichment program. Then, perhaps the best way to contain the program would be to keep Iran inside the NPT with additional protocols inspections and to provide rigorous fuel assurances from trusted outside vendors to undercut the perceived need for an industrial scale plant, which could, in principle, make enough HEU for about two dozen bombs annually.

At this point, though, the third option is preferred because it holds the most promise for producing a long-term solution. The security dialogue would involve seven parties: China, France, Germany, Iran, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The seven-party format would provide the Bush administration with enough political cover so that it could state publicly that it has not bestowed formal diplomatic recognition on the Islamic Republic. This would be similar to the stance Washington has taken vis-à-vis Pyongyang in the six-party talks.

Along with security assurances and confidence-building measures, these talks could offer Iran nuclear fuel guarantees that could place the fuel with a trusted third party. Fuel assurances alone, however, would not be enough incentive to convince Tehran to suspend its uranium-enrichment program. In addition, the talks should provide Iran with tangible economic incentives designed to help its ailing economy. Furthermore, Iran’s right to peaceful nuclear technologies should be recognized. However, in return, Tehran would have to agree to cease its enrichment activities as well as other work that could lead to production of weapons-usable fissile material. In addition, Iran would need to ratify and implement an additional protocol to help provide verifiable evidence that these activities have been suspended.

If Iran rejects this concerted diplomatic effort, then the United States would have an easier time reaching a consensus through the United Nations to enact tough multilateral sanctions. Examining the past history of countries that have renounced nuclear weapons or potential weapons programs, the predominant theme is that these renunciations took place only after those countries experienced
a substantial lessening of external threats.

## Tehran’s Point Man: An Interview With Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh

On Jan. 23, Oliver Meier, the Arms Control Association’s international representative and correspondent, talked to Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh about the escalating confrontation over Iran’s nuclear program. Soltanieh became Iran’s permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in January. A physicist by training, he had previously served in the same position from 1980 to 1997. The interview took place soon after Iran restarted research and development into enriching uranium, a move that prompted the IAEA Board of Governors Feb. 4 to report Iran’s nuclear file to the UN Security Council.

**ACT:** Can I start off by asking you why Iran has chosen to resume work on centrifuges and the operation of the pilot uranium-enrichment plant in Natanz[1] now?

**Soltanieh:** You should not ask me why now, you should ask me why so late? We [waited] because we wanted to prove our good intentions to the international community and to [our] European friends. When we were negotiating in Paris,[2] we were optimists. They promised us that if we would extend our cooperative suspension [of enrichment-related activities] to cover also research and the UCF [uranium-conversion facility] at Isfahan,[3] the issue will be removed from the agenda of the [IAEA] Board of Governors and routine inspection would be continued in Iran and everything would be settled down. And we were counting on that promise and their word. But, unfortunately, they didn’t keep their promise. This whole thing continued, therefore, after long frustration. And seeing the Iran issue kept on the agenda of the Board of Governors, we couldn’t continue [with the suspension, and] therefore, we restarted this research.

**ACT:** So you would acknowledge that research was covered under the Paris agreement and operation of centrifuges was clearly part of the Paris agreement and, therefore, this was a breach of the Paris agreement?

**Soltanieh:** No, that is not what I am trying to say. In the Paris agreement we agreed to expand the scope of the suspension to also cover the UCF and also to cover the research and testing of course. One thing we have to bear in mind is that in both the October 2003 Tehran agreement[4] and the [November 2004] Paris agreement, what was agreed was a suspension of enrichment activities and not their cessation. And this was very well elaborated and we insisted on this and it is in both documents. And on that basis, when [our] European friends unfortunately rejected our proposal for objective guarantees that our activities would remain exclusively for peaceful purposes, we expected them to bring their own proposal so that it [would] be within the framework of the Paris agreement. [Instead], they brought a proposal that explicitly rejected and deleted and excluded nuclear fuel-cycle activities in Iran, including enrichment.[5] And this was in full contravention to the Paris agreement.

In the Paris agreement there is one paragraph that says that the suspension has to be sustained as long as negotiations for a long-term agreement continue. When this proposal was given contrary to the Paris agreement, the negotiations were stopped, and therefore the suspension could be stopped because they were linked in the Paris agreement. Therefore, we started and we had the right to start the UCF. And now after again some time we decided that we cannot continue depriving our scientists of the ability to conduct research, therefore we started research.

**ACT:** I would like to come back to the Russian proposal later on, but just to ask on the issue of Security Council referral, given that there is so much at stake and Iran is so interested in not having the case referred to the Security Council, why have you not answered the few
questions that you said remain? For example, on the P-2 centrifuge program[6] and in that context, are there additional steps that Iran would be willing to take to resolve the IAEA and IAEA Director- General Mohamed ElBaradei's concerns about its nuclear program?

Soltanieh : First of all, regarding the P-2, I refer you to the reports and, if you go one by one since this issue was raised, there was tremendous progress and information given to the IAEA. The only outstanding question is that the IAEA is wondering why between 1995 to 2002 or so, there has been a gap [when] we did not work on the P-2. I have to clearly reiterate what even [IAEA] scientists and inspectors have told us, that this was a wise decision by Iran, technically sound and justified, that while we have not been achieving any progress on P-1, it was not wise to go to next-generation P-2. Therefore, during that period we should not have worked on the P-2. This is what European industry URENCO also did.[7]

ACT: Are there other steps that Iran would be willing to take to resolve the agency’s concerns, and specifically, could you foresee that Iran might again suspend activities at that time to support a new set of negotiations?

Soltanieh : For research, no. It is irreversible. The decision has been made as I said after a long time of suspension and frustration, particularly as the [limits on] research have already disappointed our scientists. In fact, this has given this message to Iranian scientists that they have no right even to think and do their research. But at the same time I want to call your attention to the fact that all the research we are doing we have informed the IAEA about and given them prior notice. Everything is under the supervision of IAEA and inspectors since we have started.

ACT: Finally, about the Russian proposal to conduct Iran’s enrichment activities in the framework of a joint venture on Russian soil, the press has reported both positive as well as negative reactions from Iran. Could you explain to us the Iranian position on the Russian proposal? In principle, would Iran be willing and able to conduct all of its enrichment activities on another country’s soil?

Soltanieh : If there are suggestions for having enrichment jointly, we have to talk about it to see what are the impacts on our work. In principle, we do not want to be deprived from enrichment in Iran and we want to have this possibility. But since we do have the plan for 20,000 megawatts in our program, we need the required fuel for those 20 power plants in the future. Therefore, it is a matter of how and where we can supply and get the fuel for it. Partly, we are going to supply our own because unfortunately in the past we have had lack of assurance of supply and, as you noticed, there is no legally binding instrument—recognized document—for a source of supply. Therefore, we want to have some sort of safety factor that, in case the supply would be interrupted, we will be able to have the supply.

ACT: The way I understood your answer is that this can complement activities in Iran but not all of the activities would be moved to Russia.

Soltanieh : At this stage, we are not in a position to go [into] details because we don’t know. The Russians are going to explain to us in more detail in the next round of negotiation. But in principle, I said we don’t want you to conclude that Iran will accept that enrichment will not be made in Iran and Iran will be deprived from this right. For the supply of fuel for its future power plants, Iran might look for different avenues, of course. This transcript has been edited for space and clarity. Please click here for a full version of the transcript is available on the Arms Control Association’s web site.

ENDNOTES

1. Iran is building a pilot gas centrifuge uranium-enrichment facility, as well as a much larger commercial centrifuge facility, near the Iranian city of Natanz.

2. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom concluded an agreement with Iran in
November 2004 to negotiate “a mutually acceptable agreement on long-term arrangements,” which includes “objective guarantees that Iran’s nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes.” Iran agreed to suspend its uranium-enrichment activities for the duration of the negotiations.

3. Uranium-conversion facilities such as Isfahan produce uranium hexafluoride gas from lightly processed uranium ore. Gas centrifuges such as those at Natanz can enrich uranium by spinning this gas at very high speeds in order to increase the concentration of the uranium-235 isotope. Uranium enrichment can produce both low-enriched uranium (LEU), which is used as fuel in civilian nuclear reactors, or highly enriched uranium, which can be used as fissile material for nuclear weapons.

4. In October 2003, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Iran in a joint statement agreed on “measures aimed at the settlement of all outstanding IAEA issues with regards to the Iranian nuclear programme and at enhancing confidence for peaceful cooperation in the nuclear field.” Iran agreed to take three steps that, if followed, will meet the IAEA’s demands: cooperate with the IAEA “to address and resolve…all requirements and outstanding [IAEA] issues,” sign and ratify an additional protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement, and voluntarily “suspend all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities as defined by the IAEA.”

5. During at least two meetings with their European interlocutors, Iranian diplomats proposed in the spring of 2005 several measures to provide confidence that its nuclear program would not be used to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. These included allowing the continuous on-site presence of IAEA inspectors, a pledge to produce only LEU, and immediate conversion of LEU to nuclear reactor fuel. See Paul Kerr, “IAEA: More Questions on Iran Nuclear Program,” Arms Control Today, July/August 2005.

6. The Europeans presented a proposal to Iran in August 2005 describing a package of economic, technical, and security incentives that Iran would receive if it agreed to forswear indigenous uranium enrichment.

7. Iran has conducted work on two types of gas centrifuges: the P-1 and P-2. The P-2 is the more advanced of the two. The centrifuge designs are reportedly based on the L-1 and L-2 centrifuges produced by URENCO (URENCO is an international uranium-enrichment consortium jointly owned by Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). The IAEA has found that Iran failed to disclose several aspects of its centrifuge program. The agency is still investigating certain outstanding issues about the program.

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ENDNOTES

1. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), September 17, 2005.


6. An additional protocol gives the International Atomic Energy Agency greater authority and access to determine whether a state has any undeclared nuclear activities.


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