

## Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran

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### [Daryl G. Kimball](#)

The Obama administration entered office in 2009 seeking both to maintain pressure on Iran to comply with its nonproliferation obligations and to engage Tehran in a renewed dialogue on confidence-building measures to allay concerns about the purpose of its nuclear program.

But Iran's fraudulent 2009 election, its pursuit of a second enrichment site near Qom, and the ongoing power struggle between key factions in Tehran have undermined the engagement track. Last January's meeting in Istanbul revealed that Iranian negotiators were not prepared to seriously discuss even modest, interim proposals.

Today, the Obama administration still speaks of its interest in serious talks, but its Iran policy emphasizes pressure more than engagement. Washington must rebalance its approach by renewing discussions on a step-by-step process that leads to more-intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections and the confidence-building steps that are essential to preventing a nuclear-armed Iran.

International pressure on Iran is at an all-time high. UN Security Council sanctions approved in 2010 have slowed Iran's nuclear and missile efforts and are steadily being implemented by more and more countries. Last month, 32 of the 35 members of the IAEA Board of Governors agreed to censure Iran's weapons-related activities. This increasing international pressure was possible only because of the Obama administration's willingness to engage Iran, and it will be put at risk if Washington minimizes the diplomatic track.

The latest IAEA report underscores that Iran was engaged in a comprehensive nuclear weapons-related research program, which was halted in late 2003 after being exposed. Since then, some weaponization-related activities have resumed.

Although the IAEA and U.S. intelligence findings show that Iran is slowly improving its uranium-enrichment capabilities and already has some of the expertise needed to build nuclear weapons, they also make it clear that a nuclear-armed Iran is neither imminent nor inevitable.

Sanctions have bought time and helped improve negotiating leverage, but the time available must be used constructively. Sanctions alone will not turn Tehran around.

Moreover, talk of military strikes against Iranian nuclear and military targets is counterproductive and naive. The "military option" would set back Iran's program for no more than a couple of years, convince Iran's leadership to pursue nuclear weapons openly, rally Iranian domestic support behind the regime, and lead to adverse economic and security consequences.

Ultimately, resolving the nuclear issue will require sufficient pressure and inducements to convince Iran's current and future leaders they stand to gain more from forgoing nuclear weapons than from any decision to build them.

Rather than being permanently discouraged by Iran's unhelpful behavior at Istanbul, the United States and its "P5+1" partners—China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom—should prepare for additional talks with Iran and continue to highlight constructive proposals they are

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

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prepared to discuss. This includes outlining the confidence-building steps required to ease the current sanctions regime and end Tehran's diplomatic isolation.

A near-term goal should be to test Iran's recent, publicly stated offer to stop producing uranium enriched to 20 percent if it could have access to fuel for its Tehran Research Reactor. A stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium would allow Iran to shorten its time frame to produce weapons; Washington should not forgo any opportunities to reduce that risk.

Another critical objective is to secure more-intrusive access by the IAEA to all of Iran's nuclear-related activities and convince Tehran to finally address the agency's questions about weapons-related work. The IAEA needs this increased access to detect and deter any clandestine nuclear activities.

The UN Security Council has also called on Iran to "suspend" its enrichment work as a confidence-building measure. Unfortunately, Tehran has refused to do so, misrepresenting the UN resolution as a denial of Iran's inherent nuclear rights under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Under the NPT, however, the right to the peaceful pursuit of nuclear energy is conditioned on the responsibility to comply with safeguards against military use. Consistent with the 2006 offer by the P5+1, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has made it clear that, "under very strict conditions" and "having responded to the international community's concerns," Iran would have a "right" to enrich uranium under IAEA inspections.

A permanent uranium-enrichment halt would be beneficial and very welcome, but it is not necessary to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, and it is not realistic given the strong support for enrichment across the political spectrum in Iran. Tying enrichment amounts and levels to the actual needs of Iran's nuclear power plants might provide an acceptable compromise.

If Iran is unwilling to agree to commonsense confidence building steps, Tehran will remain isolated. But the United States cannot afford to wait for Iran to make the first move. Washington must keep testing Iran's willingness to change course by taking the diplomatic offensive.

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