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## How the U.S.-Iran Standoff Looks From Iran: Hossein Mousavian

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian - Feb 16, 2012

The past six U.S. presidents have employed a policy of sanctions, containment and deterrence against [Iran](#). Earlier in his tenure, President [Barack Obama](#) tried to change course by offering instead to engage, stressing “diplomacy without preconditions.” Two years later, however, the talk in [Washington](#) is of an inevitable coming war.

This is entirely the wrong direction for the U.S. to be taking. The consequences of a military strike on Iran would be catastrophic for the U.S., Iran and [Israel](#).

Whether Iran should be able to build its nuclear program cannot be dealt with separately from the larger issue of the confrontational relationship that Iran and the U.S. have had since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In his recent memoir, former International Atomic Energy Agency Director General [Mohamed ElBaradei](#) said he doubted policy makers in Washington were ever truly interested in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, but that they sought instead to achieve isolation and regime change in Iran.

Regardless of whether ElBaradei was right about that -- and having sat at the other side of the table as an Iranian nuclear negotiator, it seemed that he was -- it's safe to say there won't be a solution to the Iranian nuclear dispute as long as officials in Tehran and Washington continue to base their relationship on escalating hostility, threats and mistrust, particularly if the ultimate U.S. goal is regime change.

### Both Miscalculated

Both sides have made miscalculations, worsening an already strained relationship. From 2003 to 2005, Iran's team in nuclear negotiations with the so-called EU3 (the U.K., [France](#) and Germany) and the IAEA stressed repeatedly that Iran's right to enrich nuclear fuel was non-negotiable. The team, of which I was part, argued that the EU3 should not be able to deprive Iran of its legitimate right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to acquire nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment. We made it clear that actions such as prolonging the negotiations or suspending the enrichment program would not stop Iran. Rather, Iran would restart the enrichment program, even at the cost of sanctions that could cripple the country's economy, or of a military strike. The EU3 ignored these warnings.

On the other side, those in Tehran with a great deal of sway over nuclear policy ignored warnings that if Iran restarted enrichment unilaterally, that would result in Iran's nuclear file being referred to the [United](#)

[Nations Security Council](#), citing [Iran's nuclear program](#) as a threat to international peace and security. Once referred, the way would be paved for imposing further sanctions on Iran and further escalation. Unfortunately, these Iranian policy makers saw the threat of referral as a Western bluff aimed simply at intimidating them.

Hopefully, both parties have learned their lessons: Iran will not forgo its rights under the non-proliferation treaty, and the West will follow through with its threat of sanctions and referral.

From 2003 to 2009, Iran exchanged many proposals with the EU3, and later the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN [Security Council](#), plus Germany). Again unfortunately, none were realistic, largely because they did not provide face-saving mechanisms for either party. Going forward, any viable solution needs to meet the bottom lines of both sides. For Iran, this means the ability to produce reliable civilian nuclear energy, as it is entitled to do under the non-proliferation treaty. For the U.S. and [Europe](#), it means never having Iran develop nuclear weapons or a short-notice breakout capability.

## Maximum Transparency

Specifically, the West should recognize the legitimate right of Iran to produce nuclear technology, including [uranium enrichment](#); remove sanctions; and normalize Iran's nuclear file at the UN Security Council and the IAEA. To meet the P5+1 conditions, Iran should accept the maximum level of transparency by implementing the IAEA's [Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1](#) and the non-proliferation treaty's [Additional Protocol](#), which broadly enable intrusive monitoring and inspections of nuclear facilities.

To eliminate Western concerns about a possible nuclear weapons breakout using low-enriched uranium, any deal should place a limit on Iran's enrichment activities to less than 5 percent. Low-enriched uranium covers enrichment by as much as 20 percent, a level that is more conducive for further enrichment to weapons grade. A deal should also cap the amount of low-enriched uranium hexafluoride that Iran can stockpile; limit its enrichment sites during a period of confidence building; establish an international consortium on enrichment in Iran; and commit not to reprocess low-enriched uranium during the confidence-building period.

President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#)'s offer to stop 20 percent enrichment in exchange for a P5+1 commitment to provide fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor -- a proposal he made in comments to reporters last September after a [speech](#) to the UN General Assembly -- and [Russia](#)'s "Step-by-Step Plan" represent the most conducive path to reaching such a deal. The Russian plan includes full supervision by the IAEA; implementation of the non-proliferation treaty's Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement; readiness to stop production of low-enriched uranium and limiting enrichment to 5 percent; halting the production and installation of new centrifuges; limiting enrichment sites to one; addressing the IAEA's "possible military dimension" concerns and other technical ambiguities; and temporary suspension of enrichment.

In return, Iran would expect the P5+1 to remove sanctions and normalize Iran's nuclear file in the IAEA and Security Council. Iran has already welcomed both initiatives. The U.S. and Europeans have declined. Instead, they have chosen to try coercion. The result was evidenced in recent days, as Iranian officials announced the insertion of their first domestically produced 20 percent fuel rod, and an increase in the number of enrichment [centrifuges](#) to 9,000 from 6,000.

## Non-Interference Key

Finally, the U.S. should seek a broad relationship with Iran based on mutual respect, non-interference, equality, justice and common interests. No significant progress can be made toward achieving the U.S. security objectives without first convincing Iran that the U.S. is prepared to discuss all agenda items in U.S.-Iran relations.

Both the U.S. and Iran have become prisoners of the past. They need to have a realistic assessment of potential areas where they could have common interests, such as [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#), security in the [Persian Gulf](#), curbing drug trafficking, opposing al-Qaeda, and limiting the role of the Taliban. Unfortunately, the pursuit of these potential common interests has so far been hampered by a preoccupation with the nuclear file and the domestic political climate in both countries.

(Seyed Hossein Mousavian is an associate research scholar at [Princeton University](#)'s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiating team. He was Iran's ambassador to [Germany](#) from 1990 to 1997. This is the third in a series of op-ed articles about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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