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The Iranian Nuclear Dispute: Origins and Current Options

[By Hossein Mousavian](#)

After a pause of more than a year, the seven countries that are holding talks on Iran's nuclear program resumed their discussions in April, with subsequent meetings in May and June. As the countries—Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States)—prepare for their next meetings, efforts to find pathways to a resolution need to take into account the origins of Iran's nuclear program and the sources of the ongoing dispute over it.

Western countries have major concerns about the nature of Iran's nuclear program as they try to deduce whether it is a peaceful energy program or is designed to build nuclear weapons someday. This article addresses a different concern: whether pressure from the West has resulted in the Iranians accelerating and expanding their nuclear activity and capability.

The history of Iran's nuclear program suggests that the West is inadvertently pushing Iran toward nuclear weapons. There were seven key steps in this process.

Nuclear aid to the shah. Iran owes its entrance into the nuclear field largely to the United States, which entered into negotiations with young Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1957 as part of President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program. In the 1970s, the shah had ambitious plans for expanding the nuclear program, envisioning 23 nuclear power plants by 1994, with support from the United States. The shah announced in 1974, "Get, as soon as possible, 23,000 megawatts [of electricity] from nuclear power stations." [1] This was the main step toward nuclearizing Iran.

Withdrawal from agreements. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, although Iran decided to cancel or shrink the ambitious nuclear and military projects of the shah, the West withdrew from all nuclear agreements and contracts and isolated Iran through sanctions and other means. In that period, Iran had no plans to have uranium-enrichment activities on its own soil. Iran had an agreement with the French-based consortium Eurodif, which was established in 1973, to enrich uranium in France and supply fuel to the Tehran Research Reactor and the Bushehr power plant, bypassing the need to have the facilities in Iran.

Following the revolution and under pressure from the United States, however, the French pulled out of the deal. This event forced Iran to proceed with efforts to reach self-sufficiency to complete billions of dollars' worth of unfinished projects and to ensure that it would have adequate supplies of reactor fuel.

Support of Iraq. In 1980, Iraq's Saddam Hussein invaded Iran to bring regime change and disintegrate the country. Unfortunately, the United States and the West supported this invasion, providing Hussein with the material and technology to make the chemical weapons that killed and injured thousands of Iranians. Although Iran remained committed to the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and did not retaliate against the Iraqis with weapons of mass destruction, the event changed Iran's security calculations, pushing Iran toward a nuclear capability to defend its existence and deter any future Arab-Western aggression.

Failure to negotiate seriously. In 2003, shortly after Iran mastered enrichment technology, its nuclear case came under

the spotlight of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the IAEA Board of Governors issued its first resolution on Iran's nuclear program. To find a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, the EU countries of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the EU-3) began diplomatic negotiations with Iran. During those negotiations, which lasted until 2005, I served as the spokesperson for the Iranian nuclear negotiating team.

Iran submitted different proposals, which included a declaration to (1) cap enrichment at the 5 percent level; (2) export all low-enriched uranium (LEU) or fabricate it into fuel rods; (3) commit to an additional protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement and to Code 3.1 of the subsidiary arrangements to the agreement, [2] which would provide the maximum level of transparency; and (4) allow the IAEA to make snap inspections of undeclared facilities. This offer was intended to address the West's concerns regarding the nature of Iran's nuclear program by ensuring that no enriched uranium would be diverted to a nuclear weapons program. It also would have facilitated the recognition of Iran's right to enrichment under the NPT. [3] In exchange for these Iranian commitments, the Iranian nuclear file at the IAEA would be normalized, and Iran would have broader political, economic, and security cooperation with the European Union. Furthermore, Iran was interested in securing fuel for the research reactor in Tehran and was ready to ship its enriched uranium to another country for fabrication into fuel rods.

Iran's overtures to its negotiating partners for a mutually acceptable deal failed, primarily because the United States was not on board and held the position that there should not be even one centrifuge within Iran. In a meeting I had at the time with French Ambassador to Iran François Nicoullaud, he told me, "For the U.S., the enrichment in Iran is a red line which the EU cannot cross."

Denying Iran its right to enrichment and blocking efforts to have fuel rods provided for the Tehran reactor sent clear signals to Tehran that the West was not interested in solving the nuclear issue. Rather, the West wanted to compel Iran to forgo its enrichment program completely. This episode highlighted the inflexible position of the West and its lack of interest in reaching a compromise. This was particularly true of Washington, as the Bush administration's position was that it would never tolerate enrichment in Iran. This left Iran with no option but to change its nuclear diplomacy and accelerate its enrichment program, as it sought self-sufficiency in nuclear fuel.

Punitive measures. Since 2003, the proposals exchanged between Iran and the EU-3, which later became the P5+1, have failed largely because the Western proposals did not meet the bottom lines of both sides: for Iran, recognition of its right under the NPT to enrich uranium and produce reliable civilian nuclear energy; for the United States and Europe, preventing Iran from ever developing nuclear weapons. Instead, the West has taken major punitive actions, such as sanctions and covert operations against Iran. This has made the nuclear endeavor Iran's number one issue of national pride.

Reversal on the fuel swap. After the breakdown of talks between Iran and the P5+1 in the fall of 2009, Tehran decided to increase its enrichment capability from below 4 percent to around 20 percent, enabling it to produce fuel for the research reactor in Tehran. In February 2010, Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, proposed that Iran would keep its enrichment activities below 5 percent in return for the West providing fuel rods for the Tehran reactor. The West refused this offer.

In May 2010, Iran reached a deal with Brazil and Turkey to swap its stockpile of LEU for research reactor fuel. The deal was based on a proposal first drafted by the Obama administration with Brazilian and Turkish officials under the impression that they had the blessing of Washington to negotiate with Iran. Regrettably, the United States trampled on their success by rejecting the plan; the UN Security Council subsequently passed additional sanctions against Iran. Here again, Iran was not interested in enriching to 20 percent or continuing beyond that level; it sought only to have assurances that fuel would be guaranteed for the Tehran reactor and its rights under the NPT respected. The actions of the West pushed Iran to reach 20 percent enrichment so that it could make fuel rods for the Tehran reactor.

Rejection of other deals. There were still other opportunities to reach a compromise. They came in the form of the Russian step-by-step proposal in the summer of 2011, which addressed all the West's concerns about Iran's nuclear activities. The proposal required Iran to (1) allow full supervision by the IAEA; (2) implement the IAEA additional protocol and subsidiary arrangement Code 3.1; (3) stop production of highly enriched uranium and limit enrichment to 5 percent; (4) halt installation of new centrifuges; (5) limit the number of enrichment sites to one; (6) address IAEA concerns about the "possible military dimension" of the nuclear program and other technical ambiguities; and (7) suspend enrichment temporarily. In response, the P5+1 would recognize Iran's legitimate rights to enrichment under the NPT and would gradually lift the sanctions.

The Iranians publicly showed their readiness to negotiate, but the West declined to discuss the proposal further. In September 2011, when Iran had completely mastered 20 percent enrichment and had a growing stockpile, it proposed stopping its 20 percent-enrichment activities and accepting Western-provided fuel rods for the Tehran reactor. Once again, the West declined and made it necessary for the Iranians to move toward producing their own fuel rods.

Recent Talks

In talks earlier this year in Istanbul and Baghdad, the West still sought to have Iran halt its enrichment and would not recognize Iran's right to that activity. In return, it expected the Iranians to accept meager concessions, such as the removal of sanctions on oil shipping insurance and on spare parts for civilian planes. There was no talk of substantive sanctions being relaxed or upcoming EU sanctions on oil and the Iranian central bank being delayed. The hardened positions and lack of flexibility on the part of the West have made the Iranians dig in their heels. With each blockage and punitive Western action, Iran further advances its nuclear program.

At the June 18-19 talks in Moscow, the P5+1 once again was not in a position to offer anything on sanctions or Iran's rights to enrichment while Iran signaled its readiness to accept many of the group's major demands, such as stopping enrichment at the 20 percent level; building confidence, possibly by setting limits on production of 20 percent-enriched uranium; responding positively to the IAEA to provide the maximum level of cooperation and transparency; and extensively addressing the possible-military-dimension issues, which require Iran to implement the additional protocol and provide the IAEA with access beyond the level required by the protocol.

A comparison of the June 19 statement in Moscow by Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief and lead negotiator for the P5+1, with her April 14 Istanbul statement reveals a major difference. The P5+1 is now giving more emphasis to Iran's compliance with its international obligations, namely, UN Security Council resolutions, rather than focusing on the country's obligations under the NPT. This is a clear setback from the Istanbul position. It indicates a focus on suspension of Iran's enrichment activities, a demand that has been a deal breaker since 2003.

At the time of these talks, Iran had not only mastered enrichment to the 20 percent level, it had achieved milestones few could have imagined: the domestic production of fuel rods for use in the Tehran reactor, about 10,000 centrifuges, more than 6,000 kilograms of LEU, and 150 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium. Yet, the West still is not ready to respect the right to enrichment to 20 percent or even 5 percent. Not only has the West pushed Iran to seek self-sufficiency, but at every juncture, it has tried to deprive Iran of its inalienable right to enrichment. This has simply propelled Iran to proceed full throttle toward mastering nuclear technology. The Iranians never intended to go this far and would have been content with the West or another country supplying their fuel. The irony is that the progress of Iran's nuclear program is the product of Western efforts to pressure and isolate Iran while refusing to recognize Iran's rights.

Any further opportunity to reach a deal will fail if the West does not recognize that the approach it has taken so far will yield only further progress in Iran's nuclear program and that there is little left that the West can make subject to sanctions. If this trend continues, therefore, the prospects will be gloomy for all parties. Iran will be forced to choose between resisting Western pressures and abandoning its long-held goal of pursuing peaceful nuclear energy. It is unlikely to do the latter, even in the face of a military strike. The West is limiting its options, leaving only the option of military intervention. This cycle has brought the countries to the brink of war, due to the West's mistaken belief that pressure, sanctions, isolation, and threats would bring Iran to its knees. On the contrary, these policies have led only to the advancement of Iran's nuclear program.

A Way Out

The West now appears prepared to take an eighth counterproductive step by imposing devastating sanctions or launching a military strike. If that happened, Iran would be likely to withdraw from the NPT and pursue nuclear weapons.

All is not lost, however. Iran and the P5+1 could agree on a face-saving solution under which Iran would adhere to all international nuclear conventions and treaties at the maximum level of transparency defined by the IAEA. Furthermore, Iran would be flexible on 20 percent enrichment, its stockpile of material enriched to that level, and every other confidence-building measure to assure the international community that the country would remain a non-nuclear-weapon state forever. This would ensure the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear activity. In response, the United States

and the other members of the P5+1 would agree to recognize Iran's legitimate right to enrichment under the NPT and gradually lift the sanctions. This framework can be realized in forthcoming talks through a step-by-step plan based on the NPT, mutual confidence building, and appropriate reciprocity as agreed in the Istanbul talks in April.

To satisfy the concerns of the West regarding Iran's 20 percent stockpile, a mutually acceptable solution for the long term would entail "a zero stockpile." Under this approach, a joint committee of the P5+1 and Iran would quantify the domestic needs of Iran for use of 20 percent enriched uranium, and any quantity beyond that amount would be sold in the international market or immediately converted back to an enrichment level of 3.5 percent. This would ensure that Iran does not possess excess 20 percent enriched uranium forever, satisfying the international concerns that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons. It would be a face-saving solution for all parties as it would recognize Iran's right to enrichment and would help to negate concerns that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons.

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ENDNOTES

1. Greg Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program," Council on Foreign Relations, March 2010, www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811.
2. Code 3.1 of the subsidiary arrangements to IAEA safeguards agreements specifies when a state is required to declare facilities to the agency. The IAEA originally said that states must declare nuclear facilities six months prior to introducing nuclear material, but modified the code in 1992 to require countries to inform the agency of facilities "as soon as the decision to construct or to authorize construction has been taken, whichever is earlier."
3. Article IV of the NPT states, "Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of this Treaty."

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