
DOES IRAN SEEK NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

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In his 2013 state of the union address, President Obama called on Iran's leaders to "recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution" over Tehran's nuclear program, but added "we will do what is necessary to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon".¹Based on this statement, the two critical questions are whether Iran is after nuclear bomb and how a diplomatic solution can be reached. This article would present comprehensive explanations as to why Iran is not after a nuclear bomb. Furthermore it would elaborate on a framework for diplomatic solution. The following reasons aim to strengthen the case for why Iran is not after nuclear bomb:

1. *Israel is the primary accuser of Iran pursuing nuclear weapons*

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and is constantly claiming that Iran is on the verge of nuclear bomb. The potency of the Israeli claim has lost its effect since they have played out this doomsday scenario like a broken record since early 1990's. The following are some examples:

- In October 1992 the then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres claimed Iran would be armed with a nuclear bomb by 1999.²

- In 1995, Benjamin Netanyahu wrote in his book that Iran would possess nuclear weapons within 3 to 5 years.³

- In April 1996 the then Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres claimed Iran would gain nuclear weapons in 4 years.⁴

- In November 1999 a senior Israeli military official said that the Islamic republic would possess a nuclear capability within 5 years.⁵

- In July 2001 Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer confirmed that by the year 2005 Iran would have a nuclear bomb.⁶

- In August 2003 a high-ranking military official said that Iran will have an operative nuclear weapons program by 2005.⁷

- In February 2009 Netanyahu claimed that Iran is only one or two years away from nuclear weapons.⁸

- And in September 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Iran would have enough enriched uranium for a bomb by mid-2013.⁹

Based on Israeli claims Iran was supposed to have nuclear weapons in 1999, yet thirteen years later, Iran neither has a bomb nor diverted its nuclear program towards military purposes.

2. Since 2003, after over 4000 man-day inspections and over 100 complementary accesses, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has frequently declared there is no evidence of even a gram of nuclear material diverted towards military purposes. A question was raised that why Iranian officials refuse to give the IAEA information about Iran's suspected nuclear weaponization program? The reason is clear. The IAEA requires Iran to implement the Additional Protocol

and to address the IAEA's Possible Military Dimension (PMD) issues which require Iran to give access to IAEA beyond the Additional Protocol. To achieve these demands, a political deal between Iran and P5+1 is inevitable. That deal should constitute what P5+1 will offer in return when Iran implements the Additional Protocol and even beyond to address PMD's.

3. *The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's issuance of the religious edict or fatwa, banning the use of nuclear weapons and all other types of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).* Some people believe the Fatwa prohibits the use of nuclear bomb, not producing it. Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa clearly bans the production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons. He publically declared: "The Iranian nation has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons... There is no doubt that the decision makers in the countries opposing us know well that Iran is not after nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin and believes the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive and dangerous."¹⁰

Responding to US president's statement, Ayatollah Khamenei stated on February 18, 2013: "If Iran intended to produce nuclear weapons, the US by no means could prevent the Iranian nation's bid. The Islamic Republic of Iran doesn't intend to produce nuclear weapons and this is not related to the US concerns, rather it is based on the belief which assumes (production and use of) nuclear weapons as a crime against humanity and while it lays emphasis on its non-production, it also urges elimination of the existing nuclear weapons in the world."¹¹

4. The US National Intelligence Estimate's (NIE) in 2007 and 2011 concluded that Iran does not have an active nuclear weapons program;¹² there is no conclusive evidence that Iran has made any

effort to build the bomb since 2003;¹³ and that the Iranian leadership has not yet made a political decision to build an actual weapon.¹⁴

5. Iranian stance against weapons of mass destruction, which is far from new, has been put to the test. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein ordered chemical weapons to be used against Iran in the 1980s that resulted in 100,000 Iranian soldiers and civilians killed or injured.¹⁵¹⁶ Iran did not retaliate in kind primarily because Imam Ruhollah Khomeini was against the use of weapons of mass destruction based on religious beliefs.

6. Iran does not possess any type of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and has signed all major treaties repudiating the possession of weapons of mass destruction including the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).¹⁷

7. Based on Iranian assessments, the possession of nuclear weapons would provide only a short-term regional advantage that would transform into a longer-term vulnerability, as it would trigger a regional nuclear arms race, bringing sooner or later Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia into the fold.

8. A nuclear-weapon-free zone for the Middle East was first proposed by Iran in 1974¹⁸ and the main obstacle to the initiative has been Israel—the only country in the region that possesses hundreds of nuclear weapons and is not a member of the NPT. This is a major political leverage for Iran to ask the international community to place pressure on Israel to join the NPT promptly, put all its nuclear activities under the IAEA and destroy all its nuclear weapons capabilities and nuclear weapons facilities. An Iranian nuclear bomb would reverse the equation against Iran and in favor of Israel. Even most recently, Iran declared its readiness to participate in Middle East WMDFZ conference which was planned to be held in Helsinki in

December 2012¹⁹ but it was Israel's unwillingness to participate, causing the postponement of the conference.²⁰

9. The technical choices Iran has made in the configuration of its nuclear program demonstrate a preference for a robust enrichment capability rather than for a rapid nuclear weapons breakout capability. Iran's development program is focused on next-generation nuclear technologies, rather than mass production or maximum installation of first IR-1 and second generation IR-2 centrifuges. There are more advantageous configurations Iran can implement if it was determined to acquire weapons in the near term.

10. Iran has shown no urgency to advance its nuclear dual-use efforts. Even the activities detailed in the November 2011 IAEA report are not directed at any specific nuclear weaponization program. According to Robert Kelly, a top American nuclear expert and a former IAEA inspector, the report was misleading and aimed to bolster hardliners "by taking information and feeding it as raw meat to people who want to move forward with war."²¹

11. Iran recognizes that by becoming a nuclear weapons state, it will compel Russia and China to join the United States and implement devastating sanctions that would paralyze the Iranian economy.

12. Iran does not want to give the Israelis ample ammunition to rally the US and the international community on a perceived existential threat to its existence for creating another war in the Middle East.

13. Iran's ultimate strategy is to be a modern nation, fully capable of competing with the West in terms of advanced technologies. The majority of Iran's prominent politicians believe that possessing nuclear weapons would be an obstacle in the long-term for Iran's access to vast technological cooperation with developed countries. They do not want to see Iran come under extreme international isolation as levied against North Korea.

14. In summer 2011, Mohamed ElBaradei, the former Director General of the IAEA for 12 years and a Nobel Peace Prize recipient stated: “I have not seen a shred of evidence that Iran has been weaponizing, in terms of building nuclear-weapons facilities and using enriched materials. . . . I don’t believe Iran is a clear and present danger. All I see is the hype about the threat posed by Iran.”²²

Mohammed ElBaradei refused to bow before war-mongers and was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet his successor, Yukiya Amano according to Wikileaks disclosure of a US Embassy cable in Vienna, described himself as ‘*solidly in the U.S. court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program*’.²³

15. In early 2012, CBS News asked the US Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta whether Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon. He responded: “No. But we know that they’re trying to develop a nuclear capability. And that’s what concerns us. And our red line to Iran is: do not develop a nuclear weapon. That’s a red line for us.”²⁴ Even if the main concern with Iran is about its intention to achieve a “break-out” capability—it would not constitute anything illegal done by Tehran and in fact there are many countries who have achieved the break-out capability such as Japan and Brazil.

16. During nuclear negotiations from 2003-05 between Iran and France, Germany, and the UK (the EU-3), Iran submitted a variety of proposals, which included a commitment to:

- Cap enrichment at the 5 percent level;
- Export all low-enriched uranium (LEU) or fabricate it into fuel rods;
- Commit to an additional protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement and to Code 3.1 of the subsidiary arrangements to the agreement, which would provide the maximum level of transparency;
- Allow the IAEA to make snap inspections of undeclared

facilities; and

- To ship its enriched uranium to another country for fabrication into fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).

These offers were intended to ensure that no enriched uranium would be diverted to a nuclear weapons program in the future. That's why the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman recently said: "Iran, in order to prove its goodwill, has even gone beyond the commitments enumerated in the agency's regulations."²⁵ However the US and EU rejected the offer.

17. 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 Research Reactor. The West refused this offer.

18. In May 2010, Iran reached a deal with Brazil and Turkey to swap its stockpile of Low Enriched Uranium (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.

19. The IAEA deputy director-general, Mr. Herman Nackaerts, visited Iran in August 2011. He was provided with a *carte blanche* to visit all nuclear installations. During his visit, he requested access and was granted entrance to the research and development facilities on advanced centrifuges and other related R&D facilities. No other country has provided the inspectors of the IAEA such level of access to its facilities—not even the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM).²⁶ Moreover, he visited the simulation activities and R&D facilities of the heavy water reactor in Arak.

Following the visits, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization

of Iran Foredoom Abbasi, offered to extend to the IAEA carte blanche rights on Iran's nuclear program and activities with full supervision for five years, provided that sanctions against Iran are lifted—however the West declined.²⁷

20. Iran welcomed the Russian step-by-step proposal in the summer of 2011,²⁸ which addressed all the West's concerns about Iran's nuclear activities. The proposal required Iran to:

- Allow full supervision by the IAEA;
- Implement the IAEA additional protocol and subsidiary arrangement Code 3.1;
- Halt production of highly enriched uranium and limit enrichment to 5 percent;
- Cease installation of new centrifuges;
- Limit the number of enrichment sites to one;
- Address IAEA concerns about the “possible military dimension” of the nuclear program and other technical ambiguities; and
- Suspend enrichment temporarily.²⁹

This plan did not take off, lacking support from the West.

21. Accusation levied against Iran for stockpiling enriched uranium to build nuclear weapons are misleading, since Iran requires 27 tons of uranium enriched at 3.5% level annually to provide fuel for its only nuclear power plant in Bushehr. Up to now, Iran has produced about 7 tons and needs an additional 20 tons. Although fuel for Bushehr will be supplied by Russians and some people may think there is no need for Iran to enrich for Bushehr, but Iran does not want to be totally reliant on Russia forever for Bushehr and for all of its future nuclear fuel needs.

22. The West's biggest concern and therefore highest priority in nuclear talks have centered on Iran's 20% enriched uranium. First in February 2010 and for the second time in Sept 2011, Iran proposed to

stop its 20% enrichment in return for fuel rods—once again the West declined. At the meeting between EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton and Iran's leading nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili on September 19, 2012; Iran once again offered to suspend its enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, provided proportionate reciprocation would be taken by P5+1.³⁰ "If they give us the 20 percent [enriched] fuel, we will immediately halt 20 percent [enrichment]," Ahmadinejad said in an interview with Iranian state-run television.³¹ But Europe responded to his goodwill by placing more sanctions.

23. Recent Israeli warning that Iran will be on the brink of developing a nuclear weapon by mid-2013 has no technical logic since international experts' assessment concluded that Iran would need several years to build a reliable and deliverable nuclear warhead.³² This confirms Iran's repeated position that nuclear weapons are not part and parcel of its defense strategy.

24. A major accusation levied against Iran is once it acquires nuclear weapons, it will use it against the US and Israel. This makes no rational sense, since any provocation by Iran against the US and Israel, who possess 8000 and 400 nuclear weapons respectively, would result in Iran's total annihilation. Iran has publically acknowledged this fact.³³

25. The primary concern of certain US politicians is that Iran's motive for seeking nuclear weapons is nuclear deterrence—to ensure Washington would not attack it at will, instigate regime change or reach its objectives.³⁴ If this concern is accurate, then Iran's nuclear weapons could be used to prevent war—a positive outcome. However this concern relies on the wrong premise, as Iran has not aimed to acquire nuclear weapons in the face of concerted effort by the US and the West to engineer regime change in Tehran, including the use of war.

During eight years of Iraqi aggression against Iran, the US and the

West did their utmost to support the aggressor and yet failed to bring defeat to Iran. Paradoxically for some, Iran without nuclear weapons has become more powerful year after year in the past 34 years— dwarfing the West and US efforts to bring about the collapse of the government – while the US and Israel’s position in the region has declined despite thousands of nuclear weapons in their possession.

The next question is what can be the way out of the present diplomatic quagmire on Iranian nuclear dilemma. Iran expects international recognition of the country's legitimate right to enrichment under the NPT and the lifting of sanctions. The P5+1 (The five permanent members of U.N Security Council and Germany), meanwhile, have articulated five major demands based on the NPT:

1) Implement the so-called Additional Protocol, which enables further intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, including visits to military sites such as Parchin,

2) Make the nuclear program more transparent by implementing the Subsidiary Arrangement code 3.1,

3) Give access to the IAEA beyond the NPT and its Additional Protocol to address concerns about possible military dimensions to the country's nuclear activities,

4) Limit uranium enrichment to 20 percent, and

5) Convert to fuel rods or export all enriched uranium stockpiles that are not immediately used for domestic consumption.³⁵

While these demands go far beyond the NPT, Ahmadinejad’s administration has demonstrated its readiness to cooperate. Iranian President has reiterated Tehran's readiness to "immediately" stop production of low-enriched uranium at 20 percent as long as the international community agrees to supply the necessary nuclear material for the country -- something it has refused to do in the past.³⁶ Likewise Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has even

referenced the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 directly as part of an offer to "recognize the concerns of the West and to try to mitigate them using all the possible instruments that are available".³⁷

Rather than a comprehensive package consisting of major demands, the P5+1 has continually offered naïve proposals, asking for maximum with minimum in return.³⁸ It is clear that the US and the West do not have the political will to finalize a deal with Iran. The West's proposals have contained neither formal recognition of Iran's right to enrichment under the NPT, nor substantial sanctions relief. Even Western officials have acknowledged that their new proposal is not different from the past.³⁹

A deal is within reach, if the US and the West is ready for a realistic solution, whereby all major demands of both parties within a package to be implemented step-by-step with proportionate reciprocations. Diplomacy would work if Obama, Kerry and Hagel can reorient U.S. policy from pressure politics that "keeps all options on the table" to an approach that genuinely seeks a resolution to this crisis. ❖

NOTES:

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