

7 reasons not to worry about Iran's enrichment capacity

Author: Seyed Hossein Mousavian

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Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany are aiming to end the standoff over Iran's nuclear program by Nov. 24. Iranian and US officials have confirmed that progress was made in the extremely complicated nuclear talks in mid-October in Vienna.

"There was progress in all the fields. We still need serious discussions over various issues," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said following a six-hour meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry and European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton in Vienna.

With less than six weeks to go, the future scope of Iran's production of enriched uranium, which can have both civilian and military use, remains the key sticking point. While Zarif, Kerry and Ashton are supposed to meet in Muscat Nov. 9-10 to discuss steps toward a comprehensive final deal, Washington should not derail the opportunity to reach a solution by overemphasizing its demand to limit Iran's uranium enrichment program.

The progress achieved to date is unprecedented. US nuclear negotiator Wendy Sherman said Oct. 23, "We have made impressive progress on issues that originally seemed intractable. We have cleared up misunderstandings and held exhaustive discussions on every element of a possible text." If a deal is not reached, it will mean no limits at all on Iran's enrichment program and missing the best opportunity in a decade to resolve the nuclear standoff with Iran.

The following are seven reasons not to be too overly concerned about Iran's breakout capability:

1. Under the current International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) rules and regulations, the maximum level of transparency for nuclear activities would be secured by the implementation of its three arrangements: the Safeguard Agreement, Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 and the Additional Protocol. The world powers negotiating with Iran have a clear understanding that Iran is ready to commit to all three

arrangements in a final comprehensive agreement.

2. Iran would be cooperative in capping its level of enrichment at 5% for the duration of the final agreement to assure non-diversion toward weaponization. The fissile uranium in nuclear weapons contains enrichment to 85% or more.
3. To ensure that Iran's enrichment activities do not lead to a bomb, Tehran would be willing to synchronize the number of centrifuges or their productivity to its practical needs and convert the product to oxide for a number of years. Iran's major practical need is to provide fuel for the Bushehr plant in 2021, when its fuel-supply contract with Russia terminates. Practically, out of the current 22,000 centrifuges, Iran would need around 9,000 to 10,000 to provide enough fuel annually for the four fuel elements (out of a total 54 fuel elements) for Bushehr that Russia is contractually required to supply.
4. Regarding the heavy water facility at Arak, Iran would be cooperative in placing greater monitoring measures and modifying the reactor to reduce the annual enriched plutonium production capacity of 8-10 kilograms (18-22 pounds) to less than 0.8 kilograms (1.7 pounds). Furthermore, the 0.8kg of material will be 78% fissile, which is too low for the production of nuclear weapons, and the timeline for redesigning and building the reactor will require another five to six years.
5. Secularizing the supreme leader's fatwa banning the production and stockpiling of nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction would be a strong objective guarantee. Once the fatwa is secularized and operationalized, violation would be a criminal matter for the courts to pursue and punishable by law. Iran's history makes it hard to dismiss the fatwa. After all, despite an estimated 100,000 deaths from Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iran, it was a fatwa issued by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that kept Tehran from retaliating during the Iran-Iraq war.
6. Iran has paid a high price for its nuclear program, having endured a barrage of draconian multilateral and unilateral sanctions to date. The sanctions imposed against Iran are far beyond those imposed on North Korea, which does possess nuclear weapons. The fact is that Iran has already paid the price for making a bomb, but neither wants nor has one, a clear indicator of its steadfastness on nonproliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear technology.
7. If anyone were going to have made the decision to build nuclear weapons, it would have been former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Yet, during his eight years in the presidency, the IAEA found no evidence of an Iranian nuclear program geared toward weaponization, and his administration sought to normalize bilateral relations with the United States more than all his predecessors.

I am confident that Iran, the United States and the world powers genuinely seek to reach a deal and that there is no reason to extend the deadline beyond late November. The best strategy is to pursue a broad engagement with Iran to ensure that the decision to pursue a nuclear breakout will never come about. Iran and the United States are already tacitly and indirectly cooperating in the fight against the Islamic State (IS). A nuclear agreement would be a great boost to mutual trust and

provide greater options for dealing not only with IS and the Syrian regime but also Afghanistan and Iraq — where both Washington and Tehran support the new governments in Kabul and Baghdad. Rather than focusing on enrichment capacity, Washington should weigh its capacity for relations with Iran.

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