



Policy Memo

Assessment of Iranian nuclear program and its future

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It became almost a common saying that in the process of resolving the Iranian nuclear issue the hardest part still lies ahead. Indeed, despite the fact that the agreements of November 20, 2013 were truly revolutionary and game changing, their main provisions had been more or less clear for some time already. Even under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when the prospects for settlement looked rather grim a lot of research was done on the issue. The ideas were partly based on the previous experience like the 2010 Brazilian-Turkish swap proposal and could be boiled down to two main concepts: “temporarily freeze” and “roll back” of Iranian nuclear program. So once the political will was present on both sides, the parties could get to the bargain on the modalities, carrots and sticks. And it went rather well.

At the same time when we talk about the comprehensive solution (implying that the result would be 0% threat of Iran going nuclear) we are starting almost from scratch. There are currently no good examples of stopping countries when they are that far on the nuclear path (with clear bad examples being India, Pakistan and DPRK). There is also no consensus in the academia of what such a solution would look like and what should be the optimal composition of Iranian nuclear program.

First of all there is a notion of “zero option”, which means that Iran should forego the uranium enrichment to lose the technical possibility to build a nuclear bomb¹. Under this conditions Tehran would have to close both Natanz and Fordow nuclear facilities, dismantle the centrifuges and close the plants for centrifuges’ production. The variation of this approach also states that Iran would be much better off if it follows the South Korean or UAE path. They² argue that Iran could still benefit from the development of nuclear energy sector (including exports) without being accused of illicit nuclear activities.

This approach has its inner logic but does not really hold to the reality. Iran has invested so much resources and national pride over the years in developing of its

¹ On the issue of plutonium production (e.g. Arak heavy water reactor) and possible reprocessing there is a rather strong international consensus: Arak should be converted to a light water reactor or otherwise modified to produce less plutonium suitable for extraction. Reprocessing facilities (of which there are none at the moment in Iran) should not be constructed.

² For example see: Siegfried S. Hecker, Abbas Milani. A nuclear energy program that benefits the Iranian people. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

enrichment capabilities that simply cancelling the whole thing is not a viable option for the Iranian leadership. Besides it does not have a lot of economic sense either, uranium enrichment is still a business that a number of countries in the world are into. There is no example of a state shutting down a part of its peaceful nuclear program, and Iranian enrichment complex would perfectly fit into a growing, export-oriented nuclear industry.

Getting down to zero enrichment might even cause some problems unexpected for it advocates. As it was cleverly mentioned in one of the recent articles – imagine Iran announcing that it closes its enrichment facilities and ships all of the enriched uranium out of the country. As there is nothing left to divert, Iran as a state with less than one kilogram of fissile material will not be subject to IAEA inspections, not even mentioning the Additional Protocol. There are serious doubts that such an outcome will be seen as a success.

And finally, the Joint Plan of Action, endorsed by the P5+1 and Iran does clearly state that Iran will retain "mutually defined enrichment programme". Renegotiating this point will be problematic.

The second approach is based on limiting Iranian nuclear program (levels of enrichment, number and type of the centrifuges, number of nuclear facilities used for enrichment etc.) coupled with unprecedented control and verification system. The line of reasoning here is the following: Iran will not accept the zero option but we can at least make sure that it will start the race for the bomb from the farthest point and the international community will be notified almost immediately. This will give the world extra time to deal with Iran (with a military strike presumably).

The problem with this approach is twofold. First of all, Iran is already under by far the most intrusive regime of surveillance in the history, which includes IAEA inspections, satellite imagery, spying on the part of foreign secret services and dissidents' groups etc. The latest agreements between Iran and IAEA gave the agency extra powers in the country. Further control might prove useful in some cases but will hardly be a game-changer.

Secondly, it is important to remember that any limits on Iranian nuclear program will be temporally. Or to put it in the language of the mutually agreed Joint Plan of Action: "Following successful implementation of the final step of the comprehensive solution for its full duration, the Iranian nuclear programme will be treated in the same manner as that of any non-nuclear weapon state party to the NPT".

There's no established mechanism or a time period for clearing up the suspicions about the countries attitude. In their latest report "Defining Iranian Nuclear Programs in a Comprehensive Solution under the Joint Plan of Action" the Institute for Science and International Security proposed a 20 years term to observe Iranian good will and compliance. However it seems way to long. And once this period is over, Iran will be free to act as it prefers under the NPT agreement which says nothing about the levels of enrichment or the number of centrifuges.

Negotiating the comprehensive agreement based solely on these assumptions is simply kicking the can down the road.

What might prove to be more prudent is to make the comprehensive agreement as inclusive as possible. Instead of trying to confront and contain Iran it should be tailored to make This will mean substantial increase in cooperation in the nuclear sphere. World powers should assist Iran in constructing nuclear power plants and research reactors, the least proliferation-dangerous but the most modern and effective. Iran should be proposed joint nuclear projects inside of the country and even some export-oriented ventures (Iran has a history of exporting conventional power plants to its neighbors). Working together on the commercial basis will further decrease mutual distrust and hostility. Iran will also get the incentive to stay *clean*, not to lose its reputation as a vendor. Iranian students should be allowed to take nuclear related courses abroad, becoming the part of international scientific community.

Finally, as Iranian enrichment program is not going anyway, why not use it for the benefit of the region? Organizing a joint stock company (as in the case of URENCO, Eurodif, or International Uranium Enrichment Center) where regional states have shares and their representatives sit at the board of directors might be a good idea. Internationalizing and regionalizing the nuclear fuel cycle would strengthen cooperation in the region. External managers on the board will add to the transparency of the Iranian program. It will also reduce the likelihood of other countries in the Middle East choosing to pursue nuclear weapons programs.

The mentioned above in no way means there is no need for verification and control during the transitional period. And IAEA is doing good job in dealing with the technical issues. However when we talk about the future of Iranian nuclear program and of Iran itself, it's noteworthy to remember that the final goal is to get a strong regional partner in the Middle East, not to temporarily contain an enemy.