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Iran's nuclear program—and the costs of stopping it

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Over the last six months, the prospects of an Israeli preemptive strike against the Iranian nuclear weapons program have been much discussed. Back in early February, media reports suggested that the US Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, was increasingly concerned about a possible 'window' for an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities during the months of April, May and June.¹ The Israelis said they feared the Iranian nuclear program would soon enter a 'zone of immunity' when it would become harder to stop by military means.

President Obama, in his speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference on 4 March 2012 underlined his determination to use diplomatic pressure and sanctions to persuade Iran to turn away from a nuclear program. But he stressed too that he would 'take no options off the table'. And he specifically disavowed the option of 'containing' a nuclear-armed Iran: 'Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment. I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.'² His conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu in the White House in early March was clearly intended both to reassure the Israelis and to take some of the time-sensitivity out of the issue.

The Baghdad meeting between Iran and the P5+1 (US, Russia, China, UK, France and Germany) in May did not yield a conclusive agreement constraining the future of Iran's nuclear program. Yes, it seems the Iranians have agreed to address some of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) concerns about clarifying past nuclear activities. But they haven't agreed to address the international community's concerns about the future of their program. Yes, they have agreed to meet the P5+1 again in Moscow later in June. But they remain resolute about their entitlement to a uranium enrichment program and currently show no willingness to trade that entitlement for sanctions relief and internationally-provided reactor fuel. Yes, it's true Iran is still not close to having an actual nuclear weapon. But, in 2012 key actors are looking for solid evidence of Iran's willingness to wind back its enrichment program, and to place its nuclear facilities under proper IAEA inspection. If such willingness is not forthcoming, other scenarios—more drastic and costly—become more likely.

The Americans seemed to have discussed critical indicators with the Israelis, and the unclassified literature suggests they argued strongly for using uranium enrichment levels as a key barometer of the program's rate

of progress. But that's a two-edged sword. Certainly, while the Iranians are not enriching beyond the 20% level they are not moving towards a bomb. But the more Iranian stocks of medium-enriched uranium grow, the more ominous the equation becomes. Getting from 20% enrichment to 90% enrichment is easier than making the initial enrichment jump from 0.7% to 20%. And Iran's acquisition strategy for medium-enriched uranium looks open-ended: while it says it wants to be able to provide its own fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, it already has stocks of 20%-enriched uranium that would allow for many years of operations.³

Meanwhile, the Americans continue to argue that even if the Iranians were intent upon weaponisation—and Washington believes that such a decision has not yet been taken—the process itself would take some time. In a February hearing before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence was asked how long it might take for Iran to build and deploy a nuclear weapon. Senators cited Secretary Panetta's estimate that it could take a year to build a bomb and then another one to two years to place it on a delivery vehicle. Clapper generally agreed with those estimates, but argued that the one-year figure (for building a nuclear weapon) was 'technically feasible, but practically not likely.'⁴

So far, the Iranians don't seem to be making any sudden push towards weaponisation. Indeed, they probably judge the tempo and tone of the current program as best meeting their needs—ambivalence suits them very well. So the assessment that the US intelligence community has been running for some time now—that Iran has not had a formal nuclear weapons program since 2003—might still be true. Still, the real worry about Iran is not that it has a structured program—which would make it an easy and obvious target of international reaction—but that it continues to slide towards a shorter and shorter timeframe if it does decide to make nuclear weapons.⁵ The international community can't accept a position that John Carlson has labelled 'safeguarded proliferation': 'Any outcome where Iran simply tolerates safeguards inspections while it prepares to break out—in effect a situation of safeguarded proliferation—would provide only false assurances and discredit the IAEA safeguards system.'⁶

With actual construction and deployment of an Iranian nuclear weapon still a few years away, and Iran not pressing the envelope of militarization for fear of drawing greater retribution, enrichment rates seem likely to be the principal driver of near-term events. Substantial enrichment beyond the 20% level, for example, would increase dramatically the prospects of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. In the meantime, sanctions will be given a chance to work—but not much of a chance. The growing ferocity of the sanctions is actually a silent testimony to the fact that the sanctions must show quick results.

Media reports suggest Netanyahu has bought into this position, albeit without enthusiasm. In April he told a news conference that Iranian economic difficulties had not succeeded in pushing the Iranian nuclear program backwards, 'even a millimetre',⁷ an interesting formula since a large part of the public debate over the merits of a preemptive strike concerns just how much the Iranian program could be set back by such an event. Even Netanyahu would probably concede, though, that an on-going campaign of disruption against the Iranian nuclear program—the Stuxnet virus and the assassinations of key Iranian scientists—has borne fruit. Israel might still have further cards to play in that regard.

For all those reasons, news reports in Israel suggesting that the initial April–June window has been pushed back have a ring of credibility to them. A recent report in *The Jerusalem Post*, for example, titled 'Confrontation with Iran may be delayed to 2013' tells just such a story.⁸ In the meantime, it's likely the Americans are doing a full court press around the region, in an effort to build regional support for both the sanctions, and for the idea that more serious alternatives will follow if the Iranians move further towards weaponisation.

There have even been signs of division within Israel about the wisdom of a military strike on the Iranian facilities, suggesting that Israel's national security elite is still engaged in an internal debate about the costs and benefits of such an option. Senior military and political figures have spoken publicly about their preference for other options or the inability of Israel to achieve its desired outcomes through military means. Those figures include former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, the former internal security chief Yuval Diskin, ex-Mossad chief Meir Dagan, former head of intelligence for the Israeli Defense Forces Shlomo Gazit, and the head of the Israeli Defense Force Benny Gantz. This is an impressive chorus line of opposition to any near-term Israeli strike.

Some say that Israel simply couldn't conduct an effective strike against Iran—that the task is just too difficult. There's no denying that a strike would be much more challenging than the strikes they made against the Iraqi Osirak reactor (in June 1981) or against the Syrian reactor site (in September 2007). The target set is much more numerous and diversified, and it is further from Israel's airbases. But it might not be a good idea to conclude that Israel will step back from a surgical strike concentrated on the key choke-points of the Iranian program just because of the difficulties involved. (Those choke-points are four: the Natanz and Fordow enrichment plants, the Isfahan uranium conversion facility, and the Arak heavy water plant.) In Tel Aviv, there is an acute sense of concern about Iranian proliferation: in a choice between the difficult and the unacceptable, the difficult wins every day.

Just how developed is the Iranian program?

In an annex to its November report last year, the IAEA detailed what it knew or suspected about the Iranian program. The annex—in fourteen pages—outlined the possible military dimensions of the program, based on a range of information that the IAEA had collected itself over the years, supplemented by other information provided by more than ten member states. The level of detail provided in the annex was unprecedented. And the agency assessed the information upon which it based its findings as 'overall, credible'.⁹

As the agency summarised the situation:

'The information indicates that Iran has carried out the following activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device:

- Efforts, some successful, to procure nuclear related and dual use equipment and materials by military related individuals and entities;
- Efforts to develop undeclared pathways for the production of nuclear material;
- The acquisition of nuclear weapons development information and documentation from a clandestine nuclear supply network; and
- Work on the development of an indigenous design of a nuclear weapon including the testing of components.¹⁰

Among the specific allegations, the IAEA alleged that Iran had, over a course of decades, pursued components for an explosive device, worked on the development of a detonator system with possible application to a nuclear explosive device, experimented with the initiation of high explosives, and conducted hydrodynamic experiments applicable to nuclear device simulation. The report alleged that a large explosives containment vessel had been constructed at the Parchin military base—access to the base has been denied since by the Iranians—and that Iranian weapons designers had studied how to integrate a new spherical payload into the re-entry vehicle of the Shahab-3 missile.

The two IAEA reports released since the publication of the annex—one in February and the last in May—both detail the steady continuation of the enrichment program. By February Iran had installed many more centrifuge casings at both the Natanz and Fordow plants, albeit not the centrifuge rotors inside the casings. And by May, Iran had made steady progress in its manufacture of larger quantities of low-enriched and medium-enriched uranium—enough, analysts concluded, to provide sufficient uranium for five nuclear weapons if the enrichment level could be raised to 90%. Just as worrying, media reports suggest the most recent IAEA inspection at Fordow uncovered trace elements of uranium enriched up to 27%.

What does Iran want? The answer isn't clear. The Iranian nuclear program has typically been seen as driven principally by Persian strategic ambition rather than just the immediate policy ambitions of the current political elite. Over the years, more immediate security concerns have also played their part: the Iran–Iraq war, the display of US firepower during Desert Storm, and the subsequent US overthrow of Saddam Hussein have all reinforced Tehran's anxieties. According to Ray Takeyh, 'The need to negate the American and Iraqi threats has been the primary motivation.'¹¹ It's possible too that the Iranian leadership has drawn a lesson from the Libya case—that it's best not to give one's bomb away. With the program essentially under the control of Iran's hardliners, and with ideology playing only a minimal role in driving it, it seems unlikely that Tehran will negotiate away an asset that it has spent decades developing.

Iran and the world

Ironic though it may seem to the casual reader nowadays, Iran has for centuries been drawn into closer contacts with the West. But those contacts took a tremendous hit in 1979 when the US embassy in Tehran was stormed and US citizens were taken hostage and in the aftermath of the tumultuous events of that year. The relationship with Washington is still brittle more than 30 years later, characterised by what Parag Khanna calls 'hostage politics'.¹²

In recent years, some analysts have suggested that Iran has despaired of rebuilding its relationships with the West, and has consciously turned to the East to find a set of partners amongst India, China and Russia.¹³ Russia has been an active partner for Iran in finishing and fuelling the Bushehr reactor (construction was begun by a German firm in 1975, but abandoned after 1979). The Indians have been only a weak critic of the Iranian nuclear program, and have seen Iran as a counterweight to Pakistan, and a partner in terms of their shared interests in keeping the Taliban out of power in Afghanistan. The Chinese have seen Iran as a critical energy supplier for China's own industrialisation. Each of the three has given Iran new lifelines to a world that increasingly looks less Western-dominated. And each has been able to build on patterns of shared interests with Iran that aren't much diluted by Western opposition to 'Iran and all its works'.

Can sanctions reverse Iran's current priorities? There's no doubt that Iran is feeling the pain from the current sanctions regime—and finding a strategy that dilutes those sanctions is an important short-term foreign policy objective for Tehran (as we saw at the Baghdad talks). But the lengths that Tehran has gone to over the years to conceal major parts of its program suggest Iran's looking for a halfway house where it can have its cake and eat it too. And that's not going to be enough to reassure its neighbours.

A clouded future

If negotiations can't constrain Iran's nuclear program, more drastic and costly options would take their place. An Israeli military strike would sour Tel Aviv's relationship with Washington, risk opening a wider regional war in the Middle East, potentially incite Iranian-inspired terrorist attacks against those Tehran believed

complicit in the attack, and perhaps strengthen Iranians' support for the nuclear program itself. Obviously, the Israelis hope that if any military strike were to be required, the US would bear the brunt of conducting such an operation, since the degree of damage to the Iranian program would be greatly increased. But overt Iranian nuclear proliferation is unacceptable—to the Israelis, Sunni states in the Middle East, and Obama. And safeguarded hedging, where Tehran creeps slowly closer to having the wherewithal for a rapid breakout is intolerable—although perhaps not equally intolerable to all parties. Indeed, it risks a situation where the different parties—even those who purport to be on the same side—find they have different 'red-lines' for military action. Nuclear latency doesn't always spur the clarion call to action that actual weaponisation does.

The current Israeli leadership is not necessarily inclined to accept that the costs of an Israeli strike might outweigh the benefits. Some of the reasons are entirely personal. Benjamin Netanyahu's brother, Yonatan Netanyahu, was the one Israeli soldier killed during the Entebbe rescue operation in Uganda in 1976. In opening a memorial to Netanyahu's brother in 2005, the president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, spoke about the way in which the Israeli raid on Uganda had convinced the rebels (Museveni was an anti-Amin guerrilla at the time) that Idi Amin's regime was vulnerable rather than powerful.¹⁴ So in Tel Aviv, at the moment, we have a government that might well see an Israeli military strike on Iran as an empowering event.

We aren't out of the woods on this one yet.

Implications for Australia

The Iranian nuclear program is an important issue for Australia—it goes to the heart of our own concerns about proliferation, a stable Middle East, and secure global energy supplies. So where do we go from here? Australia wants to see a peaceful solution to the current difficulties relating to the Iranian program. To do that, it has an interest in maximizing the sanctions pressure on Iran in order to change Tehran's cost-benefit analysis about its program. Australia, like others, should not oppose the creation of a civil nuclear program in Iran. Still, the issue of sensitive nuclear technologies is critical here: if Iran is to have enrichment and reprocessing technologies, it's always going to have to live under close inspection from the IAEA. Ideally, Australia would want a solution to the Iranian issue that entailed Tehran's acceptance of fuels supplied by an outside power—as Russia is doing at Bushehr—or from an international fuel bank. But Iran is not attracted to that option.

Of course, if a military strike against Iran does unfold, there's a genuine possibility of Iranian retaliation against what it might well perceive as 'Western' forces within striking range. Some of the ADF elements currently deployed in the Gulf might be at risk of an Iranian strike, although they certainly would not be as likely a target as US forces operating in the same area. A military strike on Iran would likely have a range of consequences, and some of those might—indirectly—fall on us.

Endnotes

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- 7 Reuters (2012) 'Netanyahu says sanctions hurting Iran but not enough', 3 April
- 8 Yaakov Katz (2012) 'Confrontation with Iran may be delayed to 2013', *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 April
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