

July 20, 2010 Tuesday 9 Av 5770 8:45 IST  Print

THE JERUSALEM POST BETA

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Iran: The course is almost run

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20/07/2010

Finally, there are indications that the international community is taking a more realistic look at the Iranian nuclear program. But is it too late?

The pattern of international efforts to confront Iran's nuclear program has become all too familiar. The West – first the EU-3, and later the US – leads “diplomatic processes” to nowhere; Russia and China go back and forth between Iran and the West, reluctant to take too harsh a stance against Iran's ongoing defiance, and agreeing only to belated and weak UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions; and the International Atomic Energy Agency continues to pose questions to Iran about the military dimensions of its nuclear program that Iran avoids answering, while at the same time it continues to install and run additional uranium enrichment cascades.

The Iranians are successfully playing for time, and time is on their side. All sides are hesitant to firmly pronounce the Iranian nuclear program as weapons-oriented, and Iran senses that its target is almost in sight.

But in recent weeks there are indications of a change, as the international community begins to take a more realistic look at the Iranian nuclear program. The facts of Iran's progress speak for themselves: It has mastered the uranium enrichment process and accumulated enough 3.5 percent enriched uranium toward the potential to produce military-grade uranium (90%) for at least two nuclear devices.

In addition, in February it began producing 20% enriched uranium, which is the next step toward the 90%, bringing it very close to this target. Iran has reported that it has accumulated about 20 kg. of 20% enriched uranium, which, while not enough for one bomb, demonstrates that it has mastered the process. The reasons cited by Iran for this enrichment are not relevant, since the entire enrichment program runs counter to Security Council resolutions.

These Iranian advances are beginning to elicit some stronger international reactions. On June 27, Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta said in Washington that Iran probably has enough low-enriched uranium for two nuclear weapons, but that it likely would take two years to build the bombs if it wanted to. Around the same time, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns, in a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that US policy on Iran is “straightforward”: “We must prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. We must counter its other destabilizing actions in the region and beyond.”

This was followed by President Barack Obama's statement at the signing of the US Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, on July 1: “There should be no doubt – the United States and the international community are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.”

ON JULY 12, in an unusually strong statement, President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia said that Iran is getting closer to having the potential to build a nuclear weapon. In light of the expressed Russian doubts until very recently about whether Iran did have military intentions – noting that it had seen no evidence of this – the newly expressed Russian concern is particularly noteworthy. Medvedev said that Iran must explain the military components of its nuclear program.

This escalation in the rhetoric comes with a message of stronger than ever support for sanctions from many directions, with some hints even of a possible appetite for military action against Iran. Whereas six months ago the clearly emerging trend in Western media commentary was talk of how a nuclear Iran might be contained, now more and more pundits are focusing on the scenario of possible war. Some are already setting the stage for blaming Israel for pushing the US to take military action.

The message that “an Iranian bomb is worse than bombing Iran” is starting to crop up in statements that have been attributed to officials in some of the Arab Gulf states as well. While later denied, recent reports tell of Saudi willingness to turn a blind eye to Israel's use of its airspace for a possible military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, and the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the US is quoted as having said they cannot live with an Iranian bomb, and therefore military action to stop this is preferable to Iran gaining a military nuclear capability.

Iran's reaction to the fourth round of sanctions has been stronger than in the past. On July 7, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Ali Akbar Salehi went so far as to say that the new international sanctions “can slow down” but not stop Iran's nuclear program. Whether this was a statement of fact or intended as a political move to convince the West that the sanctions are finally working, and that no more action is needed,

is almost immaterial. In any case, the Iranians have most of the setup needed for going on with their enrichment program, and it's not clear to what degree the sanctions can cause direct damage in this regard.

The question is whether the new evidence of concern from the international community will lead to further concrete and effective measures. Beyond the rhetoric, much hinges on the action that Obama is willing to take on the basis of his assessment of the situation.

AT PRESENT IT looks like his next move will be to continue in September (a date determined by the Iranians, not by him) a P5+1-led attempt to conduct dialogue with Iran. Absent indications of a clever negotiating and bargaining strategy on the part of the US, it is doubtful whether anything useful will be achieved in these talks. As strange as it may seem, in a sense Obama is also playing for time, and although there is increasing evidence of war talk in the media, there are no indications as of yet that Obama himself is any closer to a decision to destroy Iran's nuclear and missile installations.

And what of Iran's future plans? Although the following is speculation, it gives a sense of Iranian options. If there are no further sanctions resolutions, and the present sanctions do not have a truly crippling effect, Iran will go on enriching uranium in ever-growing quantities, but will not feel the pressure to break out and enrich uranium to military-grade levels. Iran will continue to play for time, safe in the knowledge that the US president is not seriously contemplating military action.

If, however, something happens that causes Iran to feel significantly more heat, it would have several options for moving forward, either separately or in parallel: It could announce that it does not consider itself bound by international obligations; it could make a (facetious) request to change its NPT status to that of a nuclear weapons state; it could withdraw from the NPT; it could expel all inspectors on whatever grounds; and it could carry out an underground nuclear test from material produced through clandestine activities.

The prospects for Iranian acquiescence to the international demand that it at least suspend its enrichment activities are very slim. Whether the US is closer to military action is still a matter of speculation. An overall assessment of the situation and its dynamics leads in the direction that the present stage of the game – that has been ongoing since 2002 – is nearing its end.

By achieving 20% enrichment Iran has accomplished more than 90% of the work toward military-grade enrichment.

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