

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

September 8, 2004

IRAN, THE IAEA AND THE LEGEND OF THE SMOKING GUN

Ephraim Asculai
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

As can be seen both from the most recent report (the seventh in the series) by the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (the IAEA) to his Board of Governors (BOG) and from additional published information, Iran is relentlessly pursuing its quest for nuclear weapons. However, while all the facts warrant a declaration that Iran is in non-compliance with its NPT obligations, there is no indication that the IAEA will issue such a declaration.

What are the facts? Iran is pursuing its ambition of obtaining the fissile materials needed for the core of an explosive device via two main routes: the enriched uranium route and the plutonium route. In order to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU), Iran needs to convert uranium ore into feed material for the enrichment facilities and then convert the HEU into uranium metal. Iran has acknowledged the two methods by which it tries to enrich uranium: the gas centrifuges and the Atomic Vapor Laser Isotope Separation (AVLIS).

As for the plutonium route, Iran declared its intention to construct a natural uranium-heavy water reactor, which is a most efficient way of producing plutonium, the other material that can

be used in the core of nuclear weapons. In addition, it tried to purchase hot cells and associated equipment for the separation of plutonium from irradiated reactor fuel. Iran could also use its Bushehr nuclear power reactor to produce plutonium.

Another major component of a nuclear weapon is the explosive mechanism and the necessary nuclear igniter. One igniter utilizes an isotope of polonium, which was under study in Iran and for which there is no other logical use.

These basic facts demonstrate that Iran has sought nuclear weapons technologies through diverse and redundant routes, in case any one of them failed. When Iran was first confronted with the facts, it tried evasive and concealment tactics, and when some of these failed, it tried excuses and explanations, many of which are still unacceptable to the IAEA. When all the "noise" concerning Iran's right to develop all nuclear technologies is stripped away, what is left is evidence of a nuclear military program including components and findings that cannot be explained in any other way.

Notwithstanding the "problems" in explaining its past activities and the damning findings, Iran is proceeding with its program of producing feed

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

materials for enrichment, with construction and testing of its gas-centrifuge facilities, etc. The agreement with the EU-3 (the United Kingdom, Germany and France) concerning suspension of the construction and testing of gas-centrifuges was more of a nuisance than a real setback and has, in any case, been violated.

What are Iran's plans at present? It is not difficult to assume that it will proceed with its program in the fashion it laid down from the beginning. When it has accumulated sufficient quantities of low-enriched uranium (LEU) and when the time is ripe, it will do one of two things: either withdraw from the NPT (citing the North Korea precedent) and then enrich the LEU to HEU, or begin enriching the LEU it will have diverted and concealed in order to produce concealed nuclear weapons. Whatever the choice, it will be made on the basis of opportunity.

This entire chain of developments strongly resembles the North Korean precedent. To recall, North Korea declared to the IAEA that it had separated a certain amount of plutonium from irradiated fuel. By sampling and analyzing radioactive waste, the IAEA discovered that North Korea had actually separated more plutonium and at different times than it had declared to the inspectors. For the IAEA and BOG, this finding was *prima facie* evidence of North Korean non-compliance. Much more numerous and compelling signs of a military nuclear program, including similar findings concerning plutonium, have been uncovered in the Iranian case. The fact that the scale of deception with respect to plutonium is different is not significant and is, in any event, offset by the multitude of other Iranian violations. Nevertheless, there is no declaration of Iranian non-compliance and the element of crisis is almost entirely absent from IAEA reports.

There can only be one explanation for the

IAEA's apparent refusal to adopt now the same stance with respect to Iran that it took in 1993 on the issue of North Korea: the IAEA is politically unwilling to indict Iran for its misdeeds. This refusal is sometimes rationalized by the odd idea that a "smoking-gun" has not been found. This is a devious way to conduct business. On the one hand, an Iraqi-type "smoking gun" is possible only following a military victory. On the other hand, a North Korean-type "smoking gun" already exists.

What would happen if the IAEA did declare Iran to be in non-compliance? The United States is pushing heavily to refer the issue to the UN Security Council. This body could take several courses of action designed to persuade Iran to stop its nuclear weapons development activities. But there is always the fear that the Security Council would not reach an agreement, as in the case of North Korea, and that would boomerang against those who want strong action and leave open the way for Iran to carry out its plans without hindrance.

The way to deal with this issue is perhaps not through the UN but by amassing a strong political coalition that would persuade and pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. In order to be effective, this partnership would need to include several, if not all groups of states: the US and its staunch political allies; the EU; Russia and Japan, and as strong a contingent of the Non-Aligned Movement as can be assembled. Such a coalition could have a much stronger effect than any Security Council resolution, which would probably either be watered down to satisfy all, or threatened by a possible veto. Only the threat of sanctions or stronger action by a tough and extensive partnership that can potentially follow through on threats can cause Iran to change its course. Nothing much will be achieved if the US goes it almost alone.