

# **The International Community vs. Iran: Pressure, Delays, No Decisive Results**

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Although the popular uprisings that have swept across the Middle East since early 2011 have dominated the regional agenda and captured the media spotlight, the Iranian nuclear crisis has not disappeared from the scene. In fact, the problems that the international community currently faces in its efforts to stop Iran in the nuclear realm are a continuation of an almost decade-long process rife with false starts and setbacks. As such, the minimal movement in recent months in confronting Iran's nuclear activities is best understood in the context of this ongoing dynamic, rather than as a side effect of the shift of international attention in recent months away from Iran toward the more dramatic regional developments. Even barring the 2011 turmoil, the international community would presumably be facing much the same difficulties in its efforts to stop Iran. For its part, Iran is continuing on its path of nuclear defiance, and while it has experienced setbacks due to sanctions and sabotage, it has continued to build up its stockpile of enriched uranium while apparently working on military aspects of the program, and continues to inch its way to a nuclear weapons capability.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter begins by discussing the international efforts to stop Iran in the nuclear realm over the course of 2010-11 and then considers, given the current dynamic, whether it is realistic to expect that Iran's nuclear ambitions can eventually be curbed through negotiations. It reviews where Iran stands vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings of early 2011, and what impact, if any, these developments have had on the thinking of the US and other

P5+1 states with regard to Iran and its nuclear ambitions. The military option will be discussed briefly in the context of developments over the course of 2010-2011 that once again brought to the fore the question of whether Israel might be considering taking action. The article concludes by assessing how viable a US policy of containment of a nuclear capable Iran might be, in the event that all efforts to stop Iran fail.

### **Sanctions and Sabotage: Tactic of Choice for 2010-2011**

When 2009 ended with no progress on Obama's diplomatic outreach to Iran, the first six months of 2010 saw the Obama administration working to garner widespread international support for additional pressure on the nuclearizing state. This strategy began to bear fruit in the summer of 2010, with an increase in the intensity of some of the international efforts to pressure Iran and delay its nuclear progress, mainly through economic sanctions and cyber warfare. While not actions that can in themselves stop Iran's nuclear program, sanctions and sabotage can buy more time for other international efforts to convince Iran to reverse course in the nuclear realm.

The sanctions decided upon in the UN in June 2010,<sup>2</sup> and the unilateral sanctions that the US, EU, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea adopted in their wake raised new hopes of more coordinated and effective international efforts to confront Iran. These sanctions were more far reaching and stringent in terms of the measures themselves, and also delivered a more determined and coordinated international message to Iran in light of their widespread support. While there is no consensus on the precise effect that the sanctions have had, the official US assessment is that Iran is suffering both a degree of economic hardship and setbacks in its nuclear program as a direct result of the sanctions.<sup>3</sup>

Not long after the decisions on heightened sanctions, the intrusion of the Stuxnet worm into Iran's computer system was first reported in the media.<sup>4</sup> Stuxnet appears to have caused irreparable damage to nearly 1000 centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment facility over the course of 2009-2010. Indeed, while normally shrouded in secrecy, the different forms of sabotage that have been employed against Iran's nuclear program – cyber attacks, assassinations, and defections of Iranian scientists – commanded

much media attention in late 2010 and early 2011.<sup>5</sup> Meir Dagan, the former head of Israel's Mossad, implicitly highlighted clandestine sabotage efforts as the preferred means of delaying Iran's nuclear progress with statements in early 2011 that it would take Iran longer than often believed to reach a military capability, and that in fact Iran would not achieve the goal of developing a nuclear bomb before 2015. The same assessment on the value of clandestine sabotage effects (especially when compared to military attack) apparently underlay more recent comments. When asked whether Israel should attack Iran militarily, his response was that this was "the stupidest idea" he had ever heard.<sup>6</sup>

The cumulative effect of the different forms of pressure – especially the impressive success in getting harsher sanctions in place – has created an unfortunate propensity in the West to focus on these efforts as a goal in themselves, even though it is generally recognized that these measures are not enough to convince Iran to reverse course. Still, discussions of the perceived success of sanctions in isolating and containing Iran normally stop short of further analysis of how this momentum of pressure might be translated into a more effective bargaining position vis-à-vis Iran in negotiations over its nuclear program.

This pattern is implicitly (and most likely inadvertently) reflected in one analyst's description of the Obama administration's policies. He maintains that the administration "increased pressure [on Iran] through tough sanctions, reportedly undermined the Iranian nuclear program through sabotage and covert actions, reassured regional allies and generally bought time *while holding out the hope* of either a diplomatic solution to Iran's alleged pursuit of a nuclear weapon or some form of political change from within Iran."<sup>7</sup> Herein lies the problem. If the US (and more broadly, the P5+1) is set on securing a diplomatic solution, it would have to be determinedly proactive in this regard. "Holding out the hope" for a negotiated settlement is actually a fairly accurate description of what the P5+1 has done to date, and it is not likely to produce the desired results.

## Negotiations

The discouraging assessment of the Obama administration's approach to negotiations with Iran is largely a reflection of the stasis on this front, and

some problems that were exposed with regard to the two rounds of talks that were attempted in early December 2010 in Geneva and late January 2011 in Istanbul. It is generally accepted that nothing was achieved in these two meetings, although at one level a positive message emerged from this failure, namely, the indication that the P5+1 is proving more resistant to Iran's attempts to stall for time through useless talks. Both rounds ended very quickly when it became apparent that Iran had no intention of addressing the nuclear issue. Moreover, in May 2011, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton delivered a curt response to the Iranian chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, regarding his expressed willingness to resume talks once again; her spokeswoman said that what was included in Jalili's letter "does not seem to justify a further meeting."<sup>8</sup> However, the negative side is that the P5+1 did not take some steps that could have improved its bargaining position from the start. These have to do more with posturing than substance, but the importance of setting should not be discounted. The efforts that Iran itself devotes to posturing and framing is telling, indicating the significance it attaches to this aspect of the negotiations, which could ultimately have an impact when it comes to discussions of substance.

It was Iran – not the West – that took the upper hand as far as framing the negotiation was concerned. It determined the timing of the initial meeting in December (after repeated delays) and tried to take the lead on setting the agenda as well. As for determining the venue, Iran was not successful the first time, but the second round was held in Istanbul, as per its choice. Iran also early on set preconditions for the talks, including that the West address Israel's nuclear capability.<sup>9</sup> The P5+1 rejected these preconditions, but the very fact that Iran spoke the language of preconditions was another means by which it sought to frame itself as the party with the upper hand in the negotiations dynamic. Catherine Ashton was appointed the chief negotiator for the P5+1, but the EU High Representative had little to no experience with this type of negotiation – her prior experience was negotiating within the EU. She had not taken part in previous negotiations with Iran, itself a quite sophisticated negotiator as far as the tactical game of "playing for time." When facing Iran, the international community has an interest in putting its strongest and most skillful negotiator forward, especially when

time is of the essence. The absence of a strong US leading presence at the negotiations was similarly not to the advantage of the P5+1.

These events lead to the inevitable question whether there is still a chance that negotiations can succeed in bringing Iran to the point that it changes course as far as its nuclear program is concerned. Are negotiations still a viable option for dealing with this nuclear crisis? In theory, the answer is yes. In practice, unless the setup is altered considerably, it is hard to imagine that Iran will assess that serious negotiations are preferable to the current dynamic. The choice for Iran at this point is between agreeing to negotiate away its chance to become a nuclear state (in return for economic benefits and greater international acceptance) and continuing to move toward its goal of a military nuclear capability while suffering some economic hardship. The nuclear “holy grail” is Iran’s clear current preference, and something very significant would have to change for it to alter its cost-benefit calculation. Significantly, if recent changes in the Middle East end up *not* in Iran’s favor – and Iran finds itself pitted against new and more energetic Arab states that pose a challenge to its regional prominence – Iran will only be that much more determined to acquire a nuclear military capability as a means of regaining and then firmly entrenching its regional superiority.

Embracing a more effective negotiations strategy in the West would necessitate some changes of approach. The first is a change in US thinking about negotiations with Iran. Currently, the language of engagement and confidence building is still prevalent when US officials discuss the option of diplomacy. This would have to be replaced by an understanding that negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue must follow the dynamic of a hard bargain. The US administration would also need to internalize (and reflect in its policy) that while the West is critically dependent on negotiations to achieve its goal of stopping Iran, Iran itself has no real need of negotiations in order to advance to where it currently wants to go. While Iran uses the negotiations dynamic as a tactic of playing for time, it has no actual need of a negotiated settlement. Indeed, if it was considering negotiations seriously, it would certainly wait until it was a nuclear state, when its bargaining position would improve tremendously. For this reason as well, Iran has little incentive to bargain before it reaches that stage. This

lack of symmetry regarding the dependence on a negotiated settlement gives Iran a huge structural advantage over those that want to stop it. Altering Iran's outlook on the value of negotiations – namely, making it interested in a negotiated settlement, now – is the hardest challenge facing the international community.

Convincing Iran that there is a true need to change course – when its current approach seems to be working in its favor – will no doubt initially necessitate massive pressure on Iran. After Obama's failed diplomatic initiative of 2009, this is somewhat easier to do, and some elements of pressure have already been put in place, namely, the sanctions of summer 2010. But these would have to be greatly bolstered by additional steps that can convey to Iranian leaders that military action is a true option, and that the US is serious in this regard.

In addition, in order to pursue more valuable negotiations with Iran, it would be more effective to have a single, unified, and equally determined entity on the other side. The P5+1 does not meet this criterion, as the six states in this group are divided over many issues related to Iran and the necessity and means of curbing its nuclear ambitions. The United States would be a better choice, and if it assumed this role, it would have to begin projecting that it is "in the driver's seat." The final task would be to think about the contours of a plausible deal with Iran, keeping in mind that Iran would have to gain something as well. Negotiations cannot be an all or nothing deal; space must be carved out for a win-win solution.

At present there is little ground for optimism. There is not much reason to believe that these guidelines will be adopted, and therefore there is little hope that the current debilitating dynamic will be broken or that more effective US/P5+1-Iranian negotiations on the nuclear issue will be initiated.

### **The Turmoil in the Middle East**

The domestic uprisings that have challenged repressive regimes in Arab states across the Middle East have different ramifications as far as Iran is concerned, including vis-à-vis its nuclear program.

On the Iranian domestic front, the uprisings present a clear challenge to the current regime. Although Iranian leaders have tried to manipulate

the perception of these events and support the Arab protests by presenting them as Arab populations seeking to emulate the Islamic Revolution of 1979, this message has not resonated. The brutal repression of Iran's own domestic protests, both in 2009 and more recently, as well as the stark double standard that Iran adopted with regard to protests in Syria – its only Arab ally and an important link to Hizbollah – drives home the hypocrisy of its demands of Arab regimes to “let the people have their say.” A major factor that seems to be stopping more widespread protests in Iran itself is the people's fear of the regime's violent response.

In broader regional terms, Iran is hoping to exploit developments and possible regional vulnerabilities in its favor, but so far with limited success. Changes in the Arab Gulf states could be beneficial to Iran, which explains the dynamics that played out vis-à-vis Bahrain. While there does not seem to be evidence that Iran had a hand in fomenting initial Shiite protests in Bahrain, Iran knew that what happened could work in its favor, and attempted to manipulate the new dynamic. Saudi Arabia took firm steps to confront Iran on this issue, and there is a lurking danger that the cold war between these two regional heavyweights could erupt into hot conflict. Change on the Egyptian front at one level works to Iran's advantage, especially with talk of improving bilateral Iranian-Egyptian relations and Egypt's distancing itself somewhat from Israel. But at another level, a more assertive Egypt could pose a challenge to Iran in terms of regional prominence. As for Lebanon, in early April Saad Hariri severely attacked Iran, claiming that Tehran is damaging the social fabric of the region. In his view, one of the major challenges facing Arab societies is Iran's attempts to intervene politically, militarily, and economically. Iran retaliated by saying that Hariri is under the influence of the US and Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Generally speaking, there is a sense that while at one level Iran is at least temporarily off the international radar due to the attention focused on uprisings in the Arab world, at a deeper level Iran is very much at the epicenter of what is going on. In terms of US policy, there are clear indications that the question of whether Iran stands to gain or to lose from each domestic uprising has been of central importance as far as the US response to events is concerned, especially after what transpired in Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the value of achieving a military nuclear capability, the international force employed against Libya has unwittingly driven home to prospective proliferators that taking the high road and making a deal with the West on ending WMD proliferation activities will not grant that state immunity against future attack. Moreover, the very deal that Libya made in 2003 – giving up on a WMD (including nuclear) option – is what stripped this prospective proliferator of what might eventually have developed into the ultimate deterrent against such an attack. This conclusion implies, correctly, that the image of being a nuclear weapon state grants a state a degree of immunity to attack.

Accordingly, Iran (and North Korea) will likely have that much more incentive to cling to their programs; while they did not actually need any further incentive, the Libyan case nevertheless validates their thinking. From the perspective of the international community, the message underscored by the Libyan case is indeed the danger of the Islamic Republic acquiring a measure of immunity to military attack, or even to less extreme forms of international coercion. Yet while the urgency of stopping Iran has thus become that much more apparent, whether that will translate into more effective policy remains to be seen.

Finally, there is the question of whether in light of recent dynamics there has been a change in international attitudes toward the idea of regime change as a possible “solution” to the Iranian nuclear crisis. The fact that some of the uprisings have succeeded in ousting oppressive leaders (if not actually bringing about a change of regime) has imbued this idea with greater political viability and legitimacy. There seems to be an increased focus on the prospect of regime change in Iran, although as far as US policy is concerned this has not been openly declared; it is at best a tacit message. In the aftermath of the Iraq War, the very term “regime change” tends to conjure up negative images of change being imposed on a country from without by external players. Therefore, “strong and more active support for democratic protests” would probably have a better chance of being embraced as declared US policy.



### **Israel: Closer to Military Attack?**

With his influential article published in *The Atlantic* in September 2010, Jeffrey Goldberg placed the specter of an eventual Israeli attack against Iran high on the agenda of public discourse.<sup>12</sup> His basic argument was that Prime Minister Netanyahu's personal history and ideology will ultimately leave him no choice but to attack Iran, if all else fails to stop it on the path to nuclear weapons.

Netanyahu's tendency to equate a nuclearizing Iran with the situation in Nazi Germany is well known, but there are also many who reject this analogy, including Defense Minister Barak. When Barak in early May 2011 answered a reporter's question about the prospect of Iran hurling a nuclear bomb at Israel by saying "not at Israel and not at any of Israel's neighbors,"<sup>13</sup> it was not the first time he objected to Netanyahu's message of panic. He was on record from September 2009 saying that even if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, Israel could protect itself. While underscoring that the prospect of a nuclear Iran was very dangerous, he discounted attempts to compare the situation to Nazi Germany, emphasizing instead Israel's strength and ability to defend itself.<sup>14</sup>

Meir Dagan's statement about military action against Iran has been interpreted as an attempt to underscore the effectiveness of the sabotage route; but the timing of his statement has also been attributed to a heightened fear on his part that Netanyahu might actually be closer to a decision to attack. In any event, Netanyahu would most probably face some strong internal resistance if he took a decision to employ military force. Moreover, the most that could be achieved through use of force is some delay, but at great risk to Israel, both in security and political terms. Issuing deterrent threats of the type that "Israel cannot accept a nuclear Iran" pose a risk to Israel itself, as it puts the state's credibility on the line.

### **Containing a Nuclear Iran**

"If all else fails, we can always deter and contain a nuclear Iran" – or so goes the common wisdom that has been emerging in the US against the backdrop of growing fears that Iran might just prove unstoppable on its march to the bomb.

Two issues in particular should be considered here.<sup>15</sup> First is the question of US credibility as far as containing Iran from striking with nuclear weapons. Not only were many US red lines and deadlines crossed over the past eight years of dealing with Iran on the road to a nuclear capability, but if Iran actually achieves its goal – after repeated statements to the effect that the US would not allow that to happen – it would place US credibility in Iranian eyes at an all time low. Added to that is the weakened US credibility in the military realm, underscored by a number of official statements over the past few years that warned that the use of military force against Iran would be highly problematic for the US.<sup>16</sup> These statements gave a considerable boost to Iran's own deterrence against the US, since a key reason cited for not attacking Iran was that Iran would retaliate harshly to such a display of force.

Nevertheless Iran will most likely be deterred from directly attacking another state with nuclear weapons. The reason is that there is a difference between being able to deter a state on its way to the bomb (where the US and others would have failed), and deterring the actual use of nuclear weapons. Iran is likely to assess that the scenario of actual use will be devastating enough to elicit a nuclear response, and it will thus be deterred from doing so.

But if Iran's goal in the nuclear realm is to enhance its regional power and influence in the Middle East, it does not need to use its nuclear power for attack. All it needs to do is rely on the deterrent effect of its nuclear capability in order to advance its hegemonic goals. A guiding principle for Iran would be to take a series of somewhat less provocative steps (rather than one very blatant step) – making sure that each one in itself is not of the extreme type that would elicit a nuclear response – and rely on the cumulative effect that these will have over time to create new favorable realities in the region. In this scenario, US containment will be irrelevant.

## **Conclusion**

Iran is moving toward a military nuclear capability, and while steps against it have been taken, there is no one strategy on the agenda that seems to have the capacity to reverse this trend. There is no effective negotiations strategy in the making, and no real appetite for military action, either in the

US or Israel. Sanctions and sabotage can delay progress but do not change basic interests, and hence they are not a substitute for a strategy that would convince Iran to reverse course. Relying on action to delay Iran's nuclear progress – or mistaking it for something that can bring about a change in Iran – would be a grave error. If recent developments in the Middle East work against Iran, they will only strengthen its interest in acquiring a game changing nuclear capability. Meanwhile, change from within Iran – perhaps the only hope of altering the stakes – is currently not in the cards.

## Notes

- 1 See report on Iran by the IAEA Director General, May 24, 2011. For important media commentary on the report, see David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Watchdog Finds Evidence that Iran Worked on Nuclear Triggers," *New York Times*, May 24, 2011.
- 2 See Colum Lynch and Glenn Kessler, "UN Imposes another Round of Sanctions on Iran" *Washington Post*, June 10, 2010.
- 3 Mark Landler, "U.S. Says Sanctions Hurt Iran Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, January 10, 2011.
- 4 See for example, David Kay, "As the Worm Turns," *National Interest*, October 1, 2010.
- 5 See Mike Shuster, "Inside the United States' Secret Sabotage of Iran" and "Covert War with Iran: 'A Wilderness of Mirrors,'" *NPR*, May 9 and 10, 2011. Shuster quotes Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official now with Brookings: "There's little doubt that there's a covert war underway against Iran. There are at least two players in it: the United States and Israel."
- 6 For the statement on Iran's timeline to a nuclear bomb, see Eli Bardenstein, "Meir Dagan: Iran won't Achieve a Nuclear Bomb before 2015," *Maariv*, January 6, 2011; for the more recent statement, see Yossi Melman, "Former Mossad Chief: Israel Air Strike on Iran 'Stupidest Thing I have ever Heard,'" *Haaretz*, May 7, 2011. Dagan again voiced his opposition to military action at a conference held at Tel Aviv University in early June, "Dagan: Iran Strike – Only as Last Resort," *Ynet News*, June 1, 2011.
- 7 Marc Lynch, *Upheaval: U.S. Policy toward Iran in a Changing Middle East*, Center for New American Security, June 2011, p. 5 (emphasis added).
- 8 "Iran Sanctions Bill Introduced in Congress," *Global Security Newswire*, May 16, 2011.
- 9 See "Iran Ready to Resolve Dispute over Nuclear Program, with Conditions," *CNN Wire Staff*, July 28, 2010.

- 10 On Hariri, see Zvi Barel, “Neighbors: Iran’s Threatening Shadow,” *Haaretz*, April 13, 2011.
- 11 See Emily B. Landau, “Bahrain: The Next Test for President Obama,” *Walla!* February 18, 2011. David Sanger, in “The Larger Game in the Middle East: Iran” *New York Times*, April 2, 2011, noted that “containing Iran’s power remains [the Obama team’s] central goal in the Middle East. Every decision – from Libya to Yemen to Bahrain to Syria – is being examined under the prism of how it will affect what was, until mid-January, the dominating calculus in the Obama administration’s regional strategy: how to slow Iran’s nuclear progress, and speed the arrival of opportunities for a successful uprising there.”
- 12 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Point of No Return,” *The Atlantic*, September 2010.
- 13 Gidi Weitz, “Barak to Haaretz: Iran won’t Drop Nuclear Bomb on Israel” *Haaretz*, May 5, 2011.
- 14 Ethan Bronner, “Obama to Meet with Mideast Leaders,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2009.
- 15 This section draws on Emily B. Landau, “Can the US Contain a Nuclear Iran?” *INSS Insight* No. 171, March 24, 2010.
- 16 See for example, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who in April 2009 warned about the dangerous consequences of an attack, saying that a strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities would unify Iran, “cement their determination to have a nuclear program, and also build into the whole country an undying hatred of whoever hits them,” in *Los Angeles Times*, April 16 2009. In mid February 2010, on the possibility of an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen said that “the outbreak of a conflict will be a big, big, big problem for all of us, and I worry about the unintended consequences of a strike,” *Global Security Newswire*, February 16, 2010.