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Iran: Embroiled in Dilemmas, Poised at a Watershed

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The explosion on July 2, 2020 at the site for assembling advanced centrifuges in the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz dealt a blow to Iran's plans to progress to more advanced stages in its nuclear project – although it will not prevent Iran's continued accumulation of enriched uranium, which in principle shortens the Iranian timetable for obtaining a nuclear weapon. The Iranian dilemma is whether to exercise restraint or to respond, and if it chooses to respond, how. Thus far, Israel has not been accused directly. Tehran's response options are in the nuclear sphere (uranium enrichment to 20 percent or interference with inspections); the cyber sphere; the kinetic sphere against Israel, Saudi Arabia, or American facilities (ground-to-ground missiles and/or drones); and international terrorism. All of the options involve risks, and do not serve the primary Iranian interest of having the sanctions against it removed soon. The growing pressure in Tehran, however, joined by ideological considerations and political infighting, makes a response more likely, and requires Israel to prepare defenses and responses for each of these options.

The explosion on July 2, 2020 at the site for assembling advanced centrifuges in the uranium enrichment facility at Natanz was above all a blow to Iran's plans to move on to more advanced stages in its nuclear project. However, it will not prevent Iran's continued accumulation of enriched uranium, underway since Iran began its gradual violations of the nuclear agreement. According to the latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran currently possesses over 1,500 kg of enriched uranium, which is sufficient for enrichment to military level of one nuclear device. On the other hand, the explosion did damage an important component, which Iran will have to rebuild, and delays the essential tests for using the centrifuges and their possible future use in a small clandestine device. The explosion in Natanz follows a series of events, including an explosion in a missile manufacturing plant at Khojir, near Parchin. Although all the incidents are not necessarily related or the result of sabotage, the extraordinary string of events has heightened the tension in the Iranian leadership and generated pressure to respond.

Moreover, the explosion at Natanz follows a sequence of diplomatic developments. On June 19, at the most recent meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors, a resolution was

passed, sponsored by the three European signatories of the nuclear agreement: the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. The resolution demands that Iran allow IAEA inspectors to enter two sites suspected for nuclear activity. The resolution also demands that questions be answered about a third site, where the IAEA found particles of natural uranium and received no explanation for them. This resolution, even though not accompanied by sanctions, was the first of its kind since 2012. It aroused much anger in Tehran, which has rejected the IAEA's demand to visit the sites (the presence of the sites became known with the exposure of the documents – forged, according to Iran – obtained in the Mossad raid on Iran's nuclear archives). The Board of Governors' resolution was passed in the framework of the IAEA's commitment to examine new information, and is likely to indicate non-compliance by Iran with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) requirements, even after the 2015 nuclear deal was reached. In effect, the deal constituted a decision to ignore Iranian past violations of the NPT and the absence of answers to questions posed to Tehran by the IAEA.

Senior figures in Iran attacked the resolution, while personally attacking the Director General of the IAEA Board of Governors, and made it clear that countermeasures would be considered. The incoming speaker of the Iranian parliament, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, emphasized that the Iranian parliament demanded that the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepare a response to this step. Various members of parliament raised proposals for debate regarding measures involving cooperation with IAEA, including disavowal of obligations under the IAEA Additional Protocol. Others demanded that Iran withdraw from the NPT and attacked the European countries, which they said had not fulfilled their commitments under the nuclear agreement, and accused them of "surrendering" to American pressure. In a press release, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphasized Iran's obligation to cooperate with IAEA demands, especially given the problematic history of Iran's nuclear program.

In tandem, Washington is spearheading an effort in the UN Security Council to extend the embargo on sales of weaponry to and from Iran. This embargo is due to expire in October 2020 as part of the understandings between Iran and the P5+1 in the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which anchored the agreement. Washington has already distributed a draft resolution to the Security Council members, but the move is strongly opposed by Russia and China and has aroused concern in Europe. The European countries are trying to propose a compromise that will prevent escalation. Inter alia, ideas were raised for a short extension of the embargo, but these were opposed by the United States, which demands an extension with no time limit.

The Trump administration is aware of the opposition to its actions and of the desire among its P5+1 partners, above all the European countries, to preserve the agreement

framework, however weak, if only to save face. The administration therefore made it clear that if its demand for extension of the embargo is not accepted, it will activate the snapback mechanism, which can renew all of the Security Council's sanctions. In a letter to the UN Secretary General, Russia stated that this measure had no legal validity, because the United States had itself withdrawn from the agreement, and the European countries were strongly opposed to the measure. Washington, however, is citing the fact that the United States is mentioned in Resolution 2231, which endorsed the agreement, and says that it will go ahead with its plans.

Iran regards the sequence of events beginning with the recent IAEA resolution as part of an organized plan aimed at paving the way for a resolution at the next IAEA Board of Governors meeting stating that Iran is not complying with the NPT, bringing the matter to the Security Council, and preparing the political groundwork for Washington's restoration of sanctions. In any case, Iran believes that the strategic purpose of all the measures promoted by the Trump administration is to dispense with what remains of the nuclear agreement, and ensure that if a Democratic administration is elected, there will be no agreement left to renew. Some in Iran also believe that the US measures are designed to push Iran to extreme measures that will create a favorable atmosphere for an attack against it. As Iran sees it, the explosion at the Natanz facility is part of a broad plan led by the US and Israel to thwart Iran's nuclear progress using both kinetic and diplomatic means, even though Iran has so far avoided accusing Israel. Indeed, while Iran stated that the nature of the event at Natanz was clear, neither Israel nor any other party has been named by official Iranian sources in this context.

The principal dilemma facing the Iranian leadership is whether to wait or to respond, and if to respond, with what response. Before the explosion at Natanz, it was believed that Iran had no interest in playing into the Trump administration's hands, and preferred to keep a lower profile until the presidential elections in November, in the hope that the election of a Democratic administration would bring about a change in American policy. The new situation created following the attack on the advanced centrifuges facility, however, alters Iran's balance of considerations, and plays into the hands of the extremist elements in the Iranian regime, which regard the absence of a response as a demonstration of weakness. The opposing camp of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif prefers to give a new US administration, if elected, a chance to make a change that will above all contain economic benefits desperately needed by the Iranian economy because of the worsening economic crisis and the mounting second wave of the coronavirus. Zarif has also warned against the consequences of actions that will make Iran appear as a threat to global security.

Iran's Potential Responses

*In the **nuclear sphere**:* Since all of the recent actions against Iran are in the nuclear sphere, Tehran might decide on measures in this area: raising uranium enrichment to 20 percent, as was underway before the agreement; reducing its cooperation with the IAEA, either by abandoning the Additional Protocol, which Iran in any case accepted "voluntarily" but not yet ratified, or by imposing partial restrictions on the inspection in the framework of the nuclear agreement; and withdrawal from the NPT (a more extreme step). The measures concerning supervision will make it difficult for both Russia and China, as well as the Europeans, to continue supporting Iran, and will expedite the transfer of the issue to the Security Council. Any measure by Iran in the nuclear sphere can be portrayed by Iran as one that can be quickly withdrawn, and as a bargaining chip for future negotiations.

*In the **cyber sphere**:* With its relatively low signature, cyber activity incurs a relatively low risk of military escalation. Such a measure, however, depends on available operational capability and an assessment that the chances of success are high. It also generates exposure to a severe response that will further worsen the regime's image as being incapable of protecting infrastructure and critical sites.

*In the **direct kinetic sphere*** (for example, ground-to-ground missiles or drones): This can be a response against Israel and/or Saudi Arabia and/or American facilities in the region. Such an act, if carried out from Iranian territory, will expose Iran to a direct response, although Iran's attack against the Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia passed without any such response. Alternatively, Iran can use the territory of a third country – Yemen, Iraq, or Syria – for an attack of this kind.

Terrorism: This is ostensibly a relatively easy measure for Iran and its satellites. Iran must take into account, however, that its responsibility will be obvious. Terrorism is liable to unite the international order against it at a time when Iran is in great need of international support.

In conclusion, all of the options seemingly available to Iran are very risky, and do not serve its main goal of obtaining quick relief from sanctions while weathering the upcoming meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors in September, the Security Council discussions scheduled for October, and the United States elections in November. Given the growing pressure from inside the regime, however (because of the event at Natanz and also because of the expected political developments), an Iranian response has become more likely. The ideological aspects and political infighting are part of the debate now underway within the Iranian leadership, and are likely to affect its decisions in this

matter. Clearly Israel should prepare its defense for each of these response options, and should formulate its own counter-response to all of them.