

With Iran, we are at a nuclear crossroads

As Iran nudges its uranium enrichment perilously close to weapons-grade level, an existentially threatened Israel would have to go it alone

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Tensions have been rising in the Middle East, mostly related to Iran, in particular to its advances in the nuclear area. Whether by design, or as the result of developments, Iran has been gathering its nuclear capabilities at the starting post and was almost ready to start production of a nuclear explosive device, just waiting for the leadership's decision, and the subsequent order to do so.

It should be clear that recent events, notably the explosion at Natanz, are a temporary setback to Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities. They are by no means devastating, and given time, the facility will be resurrected. In addition, the other, albeit smaller, enrichment facility at Fordow has not been harmed, and can probably continue enriching uranium, contrary to its JCPOA obligations.

In retribution for the alleged sabotage at Natanz, Iran announced its decision to enrich uranium to a hitherto unattained level of 60 percent, and claim that it had done so. For Iran, the step from the 60% uranium enrichment level to the weapons grade of 90% is technically a minor one, but it is the necessary final one. Iran has been using its enrichment potential to pressure the US and the Europeans to remove the economic sanctions that are fierce, although not debilitating.

Would Iran halt its present nuclear weapons development program and fully return to the terms of the JCPOA if the US were to remove all sanctions? Returning to the JCPOA would certainly prolong the estimated "breakout" time, from a few weeks back to again about a year.

One thing should be clear: there is no exact return to the pre-Trump situation. For one thing, Iran has used this time to further develop its centrifuge capabilities, build advanced models and test them. This capability — the R&D knowledge and experience gained — is there to stay, and this is probably not their only remaining capability. Second, there are still many faults with the JCPOA and unanswered questions, quite a few of those relating to the development of the nuclear explosive mechanism. From past experience, Iran will continue to provide evasive and unsatisfactory answers relating to this issue. Until there is unambiguous information, the intelligence agencies will continue to provide estimates based on probabilities, leaving their interpretation to politicians, according to their leanings.

Would Iran admit to its past activities? Most likely, no. Iran would certainly not admit to having had a nuclear weapons development program, nor provide further information leading to this conclusion. Even a recent unimportant concession to the IAEA relating to inspections garnered vociferous criticism from the Iranian Parliament and other

officials. Such criticism could gather force if a conservative parliament and a conservative president were to be elected in the next few months. The JCPOA does not really demand the abandonment of Iran's nuclear development program. Iran's probable future plan would be rather simple: not to forgo its nuclear ambitions, play for time and proceed, albeit at a slower pace, if necessary, towards achieving the first but not ultimate goal – being a self-defined Nuclear Weapons State in the Middle East. The hegemonic and other probable ambitions would be fulfilled later.

In these uncertain times, decision-making on the part of Iran's opponents has become a most difficult task. Basic questions must be put forward and answered. The first one is which country can live with a nuclear Iran? The second is a consequence of the first one: assuming that it cannot live with a nuclear Iran, how far is a country willing to go in countering this situation? Can Israel live with a nuclear Iran, given its continuous threats against it? The answer is that for Israel it will be an unacceptable situation, and it will do all it can to prevent this from happening.

Can the US live with a nuclear Iran? The answer is probably yes, given the Indian, Pakistani and North Korea experiences, notwithstanding its statements to the contrary. It is not happy with these states, but with the exception of diplomatic activities and some economic pressures, not much is being done, or will likely be done, by the present administration despite its unequivocal commitment not to allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.

Can the Gulf States live with a nuclear Iran? There is no simple answer to this question. They hate the idea, but cannot do much about it at present. Are they afraid enough to do something about it before Iran has gone beyond a point of no return? Probably not — not without active leadership or at least support from the outside.

The outcome of the above discussion is that Israel, viewing a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat, would have to go it alone. Any renewed agreement would probably not reduce its anxieties. It would need outside support, and at least the tacit agreement (an “amber light”) from the US, without which its task would become horrendous. Military and intelligence authorities would have to supply the answer whether this can be done, without unacceptable damage to itself.

At present, all diplomatic efforts are now focused on finding the formula that can allow the US and Iran to return to compliance. If that happens, which is still an if, we will find ourselves in a different mode than today with new questions and challenges regarding the next steps. After all, both the US and the EU-3 have repeatedly stated that going back to the JCPOA is only the first step to further negotiations on the nuclear, missile and “regional behavior” issues. Time will be of the essence in these later stages, without which the Middle East situation can only worsen.

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