# Compromising on a Nuclear Iran

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The inability to stop Iran's nuclear program is liable to make − or perhaps has already made − the United States come to terms with, albeit reluctantly, Iran's capability of enriching uranium on its soil. The following essay seeks to explore the limits, possibility, and implications of a compromise with Iran on this matter. The bad news for Israel is that with or without a compromise, it is already possible to define Iran as a nuclear "threshold state," or one rapidly approaching that status.

At the heart of the Obama doctrine lies the willingness to conduct dialogues with rogue states. In the Iranian context, its prominent features are downplaying the military option (though not taking it off the table entirely) and conceding the suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition for opening talks. It seems that the administration is also not interested in moving towards a significant increase in sanctions, at least not until fully exhausting the dialogue option. Obama does not want to be seen as someone looking for an excuse to apply more pressure on Iran. His personal prestige is at stake, and his administration will make every effort to attribute success to his move, even if in doing so he has to cross another line in the sand.

## The American Position

The Bush administration insisted that Iran stop enriching uranium and even sought to pass several Security Council resolutions demanding "full and sustained suspension" of all activities involved in the enrichment process. The administration's efforts were unsuccessful. Not only did Iran not stop; it also expanded and improved its uranium enrichment capabilities. As of late August 2009, Iran had installed more than 8,000

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centrifuges at the enrichment facility in Natanz (half of which are in use) and amassed about a ton and a half of low enriched uranium.[1]

The statement by Secretary of State Clinton that the United States would be prepared to provide a "defense umbrella" to its allies in the Middle East in the face of the Iranian nuclear threat has sounded to some senior Israeli officials as America's acceptance of the nuclear status that Iran has attained.[2] And indeed, from statements made by senior members of Obama's team, it seems that under certain circumstances, the administration is likely to allow Iran to maintain the nuclear capabilities it has acquired.

It may be that this position is based on the American assessment that the international community is unable to deny Iran a capability it already has, so that Iran must be stopped now, or at least its progress towards military nuclear capabilities postponed as much as possible. In this vein, the secretary of state said at a Senate hearing: "Our goal is to persuade the Iranian regime that they will actually be less secure if they proceed with their nuclear weapons program," without referring to Iran's uranium enrichment capability.[3]

This statement, like other recent declarations, distinguishes between preserving Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities, which at first glance seems like a fait accompli, and developing the military dimension of the nuclear program, which remains a line not to be crossed. In his June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo, President Obama declared that "we are willing to move forward without preconditions" and that "any nation − including Iran − should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."[4] Perhaps the purpose of these statements was to signal Iran that at the conclusion of such talks, the United States might be willing to leave Iran the capability of operating a nuclear fuel cycle. The clearest statement made on the issue came from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen, who in response to the question "could [Iran] have as Japan does a full nuclear fuel cycle program?" said: "I think that's certainly a possibility." He also noted that the purpose of a dialogue with Iran is making sure that "they don't end up with nuclear weapons."[5]

## The Iranian Position

In general, Iran's leadership is not interested in friendly relations with the United States because from the ayatollahs' perspective, such closeness

might represent a bear hug and undermine one of the pillars of the regime's ideology. Despite the many advantages inherent in normalization of relations with Washington, it would exact a high political cost for Iran. In addition, relations that are constantly in crisis allow Tehran both to place the blame for its economic distress on international sanctions and extol its technological successes, especially in the nuclear field, as a symbol of resistance to the West. Accordingly, Iran has yet to modify its basic position that it has the right to enrich uranium on its soil. On the contrary, in its mind that is what negotiations are supposed to affirm. Thus despite, or perhaps because of, the blurring of principles by the West, Iran has to date made no significant change in its policy on the issue. The bottom line is that Iran is interested in American recognition of its status as a regional leader, and like the United States, seeks to engage in dialogue from a position of strength. To effect such a position, Iran is striving to bolster the image already taking hold in the international community of Iran as a "threshold state."

American declarations that imply United States willingness to leave even limited enrichment capabilities in Iran as part of a final settlement are greeted warmly in Tehran. In a recent editorial, the conservative daily *Kayhan* claimed that the secretary of state's comments are tantamount to acceptance of Iran's nuclear capabilities: "Clinton has accepted the possibility of a nuclear Iran, and is simply trying to show that the risk from a nuclear Iran has been blown out of proportion and that the classical doctrine of nuclear deterrence will be applied to Iran just as it is applied to any other nuclear power."[6]

Statements by Iran's foreign minister suggest that Iran is at least considering a "stop" in the "threshold sphere." He even compared Iran's nuclear status to the Japanese: "The common view of Japan's nuclear activity must be valid for other nations, too, including Iran." He repeated that Iran's nuclear program is "legal and for peaceful purposes," and added that "Japan invested many years in building trust with regard to its nuclear activity, and Iran is moving in the same direction."[7] Omitted from this analogy is that Iran's nuclear status is far different from Japan's: while Iran does not have Japan's technological ability or economic might, it may have surpassed Japan in components connected to the military dimension of the nuclear program and the development of surface-to-surface missiles.

Iran has frequently announced that it is not developing nuclear military capabilities, but has been adamant, at least to date, about rejecting any compromise on the issue of enrichment. Nonetheless, should Iran conclude that an international coalition is about to intensify the pressure on it, that the economic and political situation in the country is liable to threaten the regime's legitimacy, and that the United States is in fact serious about allowing enrichment, even limited, it is likely to "compromise" and show greater willingness to arrive at a formula according to the above parameters.

Thus far the nature of the Iranian answer to proposals from the West has been, "Yes, but." Because it feels that time is on its side, Iran is expected

## The Japanese Model

What is the Japanese model that, at least according to some senior Iranian figures, Iran is striving to adopt? While already in the 1970s Japan had the scientific ability and industrial resources it needed to develop nuclear weapons, various obstacles have prevented it from pursuing this path. With a dearth of natural resources and one of the world's highest rates of energy consumption, Japan was impelled to rely on nuclear energy to produce electricity. Today, its 55 light water reactors are responsible for 35 percent of the country's electric consumption.

However, there are controversial sides to the Japanese nuclear program: Japan has an advanced nuclear fuel cycle technology and enormous plutonium reserves. According to one assessment, Japan has 7 tons of separated plutonium for civilian use and another 40 tons stored in facilities overseas − a quantity enough for more than 1,000 nuclear facilities. This combination has led to the widespread opinion that Japan can manufacture nuclear weapons within a short period of time. Nevertheless, Japan seeks to project full transparency in everything having to do with its activities in this field and pledges that the plutonium is meant for civilian needs only. All Japanese nuclear facilities are subject to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Japan is an avid supporter of non-proliferation regimes (a Japanese candidate was recently elected to head the IAEA).

There are a number of obstacles impeding Japan from realizing its military nuclear potential. Public opinion that opposes nuclear weapons, an educational system that promotes pacifist ideas, and the

to present an "open door" image yet again in order to waste time, while at the same time, avoiding a severe crisis with the international community. But should Iran seek to promote its ideological and strategic ambitions at any cost, it may choose to continue striving for nuclear weapons and not remain satisfied with America's "permission" to continue operating and developing its nuclear facilities. Moreover, it may be that this American policy will provide Iran with a tail wind and only intensify its refusal.

## A Nuclear Threshold State?

Formal recognition of Iran's nuclear capabilities as the result of negotiations will present a complicated dilemma for Israel, because it

living testimony of the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki all serve as moral reins. In addition, there are a number of legal obstacles, first and foremost the Japanese constitution, which in Article 9 establishes that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes...To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained."

To be sure, Japan maintains a well-trained and well-equipped army that participates in UN peacekeeping missions around the world. Moreover, a broader interpretation of the constitution would allow Japan, at least theoretically, to develop nuclear weapons for defensive purposes. Nonetheless, Japanese leaders have repeatedly declared that "Japan will not allow any production, maintaining or importing of nuclear weapons." Additional obstacles are linked to international commitments Japan assumed, headed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

However, the most significant obstacle to Japan's developing nuclear weapons is linked to its agreement with the United States, which is obligated to come to its aid in case of nuclear attack (the nuclear umbrella). Japan's growing concern about America's willingness to come to its side in the moment of truth, especially in light of North Korea's defiant behavior, brought then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to reaffirm this commitment with greater emphasis immediately after North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006.

will find it difficult to justify any offensive action intended to deny this capability to Iran. Although officially Israel is demanding that Iran be denied any nuclear development, in its own declarations Israel too has blurred another line. For the first time Israel publicly presented the equation that "nuclear capability in Iran equals the ability to launch a nuclear bomb." In the past, the language of Israeli demands vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear project was "control of enrichment technology," and before that, "the point of no return." In his visit to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Meir Dagan, the director of the Mossad, noted that Iran would have the capability of "launching a nuclear bomb" around 2014, and determined that "from the perspective of a nuclear program, this is no longer a technical matter, because the Iranians have solved the technical problems."[8] He thereby defined Iran as being in practice in the threshold sphere.

What then is a nuclear "threshold state" and does Iran fit the definition? There is little consensus in the professional literature about what firmly constitutes a nuclear threshold state, but a prevalent view is that it applies to a state that has mastered most of the components of the nuclear fuel cycle, has an advanced scientific-technological infrastructure, has a reserve of fissile material, and has the capability of fitting a nuclear warhead on a suitable platform; all that is needed is the strategic decision to cross the threshold and to arm itself with nuclear weapons. In many ways, Iran may already be defined as a "threshold state" or as one very near there.

Much has been written in recent years about nuclear proliferation and the ways to handle its challenges, including with regard to Iran, and considerable thought has been devoted to the ramifications of a nuclear Iran. However, there has never been a deep, searching discussion about the possibility and meaning of an Iranian slowdown or cessation before reaching the threshold. Despite the existence of several definitions in this context, all are fairly similar and leave considerable "threshold sphere room" for a state. So, for example, the term "threshold status" describes a situation where a state has the capability of independently producing nuclear weapons within a short period of time, ranging from a number of hours to a number of months. Another definition, which more closely matches Iran's status, is called "standby status," and describes a situation in which a nation already has all the facilities necessary to produce nuclear

weapons.[9] If so, what purpose are negotiations supposed to serve? In United States eyes, negotiations with Iran are crucial in order to stop it before the threshold, while in Iran's view, negotiations are supposed to provide it with recognition of its status. This is not a particularly broad sphere for compromise, and it is problematic.

American recognition of Iran's nuclear status would grant Iran some considerable advantages without having to pay for them in any significant way. Accordingly, the risks of this situation are several, including:

a. Canceling the political-economic campaign to change Iran's policy. If the status is approved as part of a settlement, then canceling political-economic pressure would naturally follow suit.
b. Iran would be granted considerable immunity regarding any military attack on its nuclear facilities. Israel would find it difficult to justify an attack on Iranian nuclear installations once Iran received this kind of international seal of approval.
c. Iran will have an opportunity to leverage its nuclear status and exert greater influence on the Persian Gulf's agenda and show involvement in different Middle Eastern arenas, free of the restrictions it might incur should it cross the threshold.
d. Iran will preserve the option to arm itself with nuclear weapons when convenient and with little advance warning, forcing Israel to improve its intelligence and develop mechanisms that will sound the alarm when Iran takes this irrevocable step and proceeds to military nuclear development or distribution of technology or nuclear materials.
e. Iran's deterrence may grow stronger because doubt will always linger about its capabilities and intentions. This will force Israel to treat it as a nuclear power.
f. It is possible that this precedent will encourage other states to develop their own peaceful civilian nuclear programs; some have already declared they intend to do so.
g. A settlement along the parameters described above is the least of all the evils for the United States, but very bad for Israel, and should it come to pass, is liable to generate growing gaps and disagreements on the subject.

At the same time, the arrangement has several advantages. First, stopping Iran before it crosses the threshold may at least slow down a

nuclear arms race in the region, because states that feel threatened by nuclear weapons in Iran are likely to be less committed to developing their own independent nuclear programs. Second, the sense of immediacy of the threat of a nuclear attack against Israel will be somewhat reduced, along with public concern about living in the shadow of the Iranian bomb. Third, if there is formal international recognition of Iran's nuclear status, it will presumably be accompanied by a demand for tighter control and oversight of developments within the nuclear program.

It is possible that stopping or slowing Iran down before it crosses the threshold actually matches Iran's own interests, especially in light of what seems to be the strengthening of the international coalition against it and Iran's growing inner weakness. Therefore, at this point Iran is likely to be satisfied with recognition of its nuclear capabilities (and "rights") while completing all the components that would allow it to overcome the last hurdle when conditions prove to be more convenient.

While the likelihood is low that the United States and Iran will reach a deal that resolves all the disagreements between them, it is not inconceivable that the sides' demands and room for maneuver will allow them to reach an arrangement whereby Iran, under various limitations, would preserve its nuclear capabilities. Yet in light of Iran's reputation, it is eminently possible that the sides will not reach any kind of lasting arrangement. And in any case, even this diminished prospect does not change the fact that Iran is now in the "threshold sphere."

One may argue that there is no essential change in the American position on the subject because already in the past the United States agreed to a civilian nuclear program in Iran, and what we have is at most a tactical deviation. Still, the United States has consistently and explicitly opposed leaving Iran with enrichment capabilities and linked the continuation of enrichment to Iran's striving for nuclear weapons.[10] It is also possible that behind the current American policy there is more skepticism than in the past about the chances of negotiations succeeding in generating a change in Iran's nuclear policy, and the administration is allowing itself some non-binding utterances in order to test the waters and define Iran's limits on the nuclear issue.

There are other possible rationales prompting the US position. It may reflect a desire to strengthen the international coalition and provide legitimacy for harsher measures down the road. In other words, what

seems a turning point in the United States approach is merely meant to demonstrate the seriousness of the administration's intentions to one and all, especially Russia, and provide the administration with legitimacy for more stringent steps should Iranian intransigence continue and defeat any attempts at dialogue. In addition, this approach may be a pragmatic tactic. It is not inconceivable that behind the apparent adjustment of policy stands the recognition that in light of the technological time tables of the Iranian nuclear program, the administration has a responsibility to try and solve the central disagreement with Iran as soon as possible and stop it now, before it tries to cross the threshold. Furthermore, this policy implies that in light of the futility of international efforts to impose a change in Iran's policy with the reluctance to attack nuclear facilities at this stage, the American administration must formulate a new strategy based on a policy of containment and deterrence. Finally, the policy may reflect a belief in America's ability to turn the clock back on Iranian capabilities. The American administration may believe that even if Iran is recognized as a nuclear threshold state it will not be too late to convince it in the future to cease nuclear development, especially if a more moderate and pragmatic regime emerges in Iran.

## Conclusion

At least in the Iranian view, the purpose of any negotiations is to bestow international legitimacy on its nuclear status. It is not inconceivable that the American administration too may be able to live with an arrangement that would include stopping Iran in the threshold sphere, together with improved inspection and limitations on the enrichment process that would complicate its ability to cross the threshold.

American's dilemmas will be how to act should Iran continue to drag its feet and refuse a compromise within these parameters. Will it succeed in imposing much harsher sanctions as it has declared? Time will tell. No less important than the dialogue with Iran, the American administration must increase its coordination with Russia and try to come to an understanding that would not enable continued Iranian nuclear progress. It may be that the cancellation of the American plan to place radar and interceptors in Eastern Europe is somehow connected to the matter.

Growing internal unrest in Iran may also make it harder for the American administration to bridge the tension between its desire for dialogue and its democratic values. Similarly, it will have to deal with the Iranian fear of Western openness, especially at a time of growing internal weakness. One way to do so is to look for backdoor lines of communication − in tandem with the public negotiations − that in the past were the preferred channels for transmitting messages and settling disputes. This would allow ways to climb down from the previously scaled high rungs of the ladder, and prevent external elements (Israel?) from criticizing any position of excess compromise.

## Notes

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