

# **The Iranian Challenge Intensifies, while the International System seems Otherwise Engaged**

**Sima Shine and Eldad Shavit** | No. 1666 | December 8, 2022

**While the international system, led by the United States, is preoccupied with the tension with China and the war in Ukraine, Iran has taken escalation measures in its nuclear program, is aiding Russia by selling drones to attack critical infrastructure in Ukraine, and continues to suppress and even kill people protesting against the regime. Under these circumstances, the chances of continuing the dialogue with the Iranian regime and consequently also of returning to the nuclear agreement are very slim, even if the sides are not in a hurry to declare the collapse of the process. The main question is whether Tehran has made the decision to advance toward nuclear weapons, albeit while constantly assessing the responses to its measures, and whether it is preparing the ground for such a decision in the not-too-distant future. It is necessary to create significant deterrence toward Iran that will undermine its confidence in its ability to pay the price that could be exacted from it if it continues to advance its nuclear program.**

In face of the ongoing stagnation in the nuclear talks, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, while continuing to provide military aid to Russia in the war with Ukraine. In response to another decision in November by the IAEA Board of Governors demanding that Iran cooperate with the agency and provide answers to unresolved questions, Iran chose to take a series of escalatory steps. Inter alia, Iran for the first time announced the start of uranium enrichment to 60 percent at the Fordow underground plant. This joins the decision to replace the old model (IR-1) of centrifuges at this facility with advanced IR-6 centrifuges, which can enrich more quickly and in greater amounts. Thus, Iran has in effect

expanded not only the amount of material enriched to a high level that it has accumulated; it has also divided the enrichment between two sites, Natanz and Fordow.

At the main facility, Natanz, the replacement of old centrifuges with advanced ones continues, alongside the addition of new advanced centrifuges. The expansion of the enrichment enables Iran to accumulate of a large quantity of enriched material so that, if it chooses, it will be able to enrich to a military level for several nuclear devices within a very short time. This comes following over two years of reduced monitoring after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the Iranian decision to withdraw from compliance with the IAEA Additional Protocol. The significance of this, as defined by IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, is an inability to ensure that no materials are diverted, not knowing the quantities of heavy water, and a lack of information regarding the production of advanced centrifuges. The IAEA Director General also stated that the Iranian nuclear program is advancing both in its aspirations and in its capabilities, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that Iran is on a path of nuclear escalation. The administration's Special Envoy for Iran, Rob Malley, also admitted that Iran is a few weeks away from the ability to achieve a sufficient quantity of fissile material for a bomb.

In the international arena, although it continues to declare neutrality, Iran has sided with Russia in the war in Ukraine by supplying various types of drones, which have already caused extensive damage to infrastructure in Ukraine. Iran also intends to build a factory for the production of drones on Russian soil. Likewise on the agenda, apparently, is the supply to Russia of missiles of various ranges. With these actions, Iran has established its position in the anti-Western axis while strengthening its relations with the eastern axis of Russia and China. In a recent meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Romania, the organization's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, called on Iran to refrain from supplying any kind of weapon to Russia, and for the first time defined Iran as a "problem."

Meantime, for almost three months. Iran has weathered protests against the regime, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, the young Kurdish woman whose hijab did not satisfy the morality police. The protests, which are different than previous protests and unusual in nature, are aimed directly against the regime and challenge the existing political system. Despite their limitations – the protests lack leadership, lack the participation of many sectors of society, and are still of limited dimensions – they pose a difficult challenge for the regime, which cannot accept the demands of the demonstrators but has not succeeded in stopping the demonstrations, despite the hundreds of people killed and thousands arrested.

These developments place the US administration and its European allies at a juncture regarding their continued policy toward Iran. For the first time, after years when the nuclear issue was prioritized over other issues related to Iran, the West is forced to formulate policy that relates to the Iranian aid to Russia and the regime's violent suppression of the ongoing protests. Even if in their view the diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue is still a priority, Iran's conduct in the other spheres will make it very difficult to progress on this. Under these circumstances, all of the sides, and chiefly Washington, are internalizing the near-impossibility of continuing the dialogue with the Iranian regime. Consequently, the chance of returning to the nuclear agreement at the current time is very slim, even though the sides are not in a hurry to declare the process dead.

The United States, while focused on a long series of challenges – first and foremost the competition with China and the aid to Ukraine in its war with Russia, along with a series of domestic economic and social challenges – recognizes that the developments vis-à-vis Iran also require attention, including formulation of an updated strategy. This will apparently be based on the elements of deterrence and containment, which will likely also be influenced by the assessment that despite the progress in enrichment, there is no evidence that Iran has renewed the related weapons activity, such that it is still possible to make the most of the traditional tools –

political and economic pressure, including expanding the sanctions related to the issue of human rights.

Nevertheless, the reality will probably force the administration to resort increasingly to expressions such as "additional options" and/or "all options are on the table." At this stage it seems that these are mainly threats devoid of operational intentions, certainly as long as it is believed that Iran does not have an active weapons program. At this time, the administration is presumably considering how it might face the possibility that Iran will enrich to 90 percent: will it proactively present the price of such a step in advance, or will it wait for a concrete Iranian step in this direction?

Iran for its part is continuing with the line that aims to convey a clear message that it is not deterred and is taking aggressive and defiant steps. Beyond advancing sensitive parts of the nuclear program, these include: an attack on Kurdish targets in northern Iraq; the launch of a drone in the Gulf of Oman toward a merchant ship that is partly Israeli-owned; and threats against journalists in London whom it accuses of fomenting the internal protests, including, apparently, a planned terrorist attack. Threats have also been conveyed to Saudi Arabia, which funds this London news channel, and it seems that only deterrent military measures by the United States prevented an attack against it.

The reality, in which Iran is taking the initiative without facing a determined response from the United States and its allies, reflects an increasing sense of confidence in Tehran, which rests in part on the assessment that the agenda of the United States (and Europe) is focused on the war in Ukraine alongside the main conflict with China, and that Iran as an issue is not high on the list. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei made clear again in recent days that there is no point in negotiations with Washington, and it seems that Tehran's assessment is that it can continue its policy in all of the spheres without fear of any harm, while relying on strengthening its joint interests with Moscow.

The main question at this time, in the context of the nuclear program, is whether Tehran has made the decision to move forward toward nuclear weapons, while constantly assessing the responses to its steps, and whether Iran is in fact preparing the ground for some time in the future, conditioned on international and other circumstances, for taking the necessary steps to declare itself a nuclear state. This question becomes even more salient in light of Iranian statements from the past year that Tehran is capable of attaining nuclear weapons but the political decision is not to do so. This is compounded by Tehran's increasing sense of confidence given the defiant actions that have not received a proper response, as well as the temptation for a nuclear breakout as the program progresses. Moreover, the Supreme Leader will want to leave his mark as the person who ensured the survival of the regime, alongside the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ruhollah Khomeini.

From Israel's perspective, even if the Western assessment is correct and Iran is far from decided on whether to progress toward producing nuclear weapons, it is critical already now to create sufficient deterrence that will make it difficult for Iran to take further steps to advance the enrichment system and the levels of enrichment, and certainly to decide on a weapons program. It is possible that Iran's defiant conduct and the protests in its territory will make it somewhat easier for Israel to enlist the US administration and the international community in taking action accordingly. To this end, it is recommended that the new government of Israel make sure to maintain an environment of relations that is free of noise, with an emphasis on the Palestinian arena, in order to enable discreet and practical dialogue with Washington, which will be necessary in order to coordinate the required steps. While various measures, such as the joint air exercises with CENTCOM, are presented as connected to a future military option, they are not seen by Tehran as a real and concrete threat. It is important that Israel work to convince the United States of the need to create outside-the-box measures that, even without declaring red lines, will strengthen deterrence against Iran and undermine Iran's confidence regarding the possible price that will be exacted from it, if it continues to advance its nuclear program.

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