

Back to the Future on Iran: A Problematic Return to Negotiations

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For over a year the Iranian nuclear file has been in the hands of the UN Security Council, following the failed two-year attempt on the part of the EU-3 to negotiate with Iran over the nuclear issue. The Security Council passed two resolutions on sanctions in light of Iran's continued defiance of the international community's demand that it cease uranium enrichment activities; yet Iran's defiance continued, manifested not only in ongoing but in fact in much accelerated uranium enrichment. In late May 2007, two months after the second set of sanctions was passed, it was – not surprisingly – confirmed that Iran was still not complying, which paved the way for discussions on a third round of measures. But rather than quickly moving to a resolution on stepped-up sanctions, the dynamics of the international approach to Iran has begun to change, and in a manner that will very likely be to Iran's clear advantage.

The EU and the IAEA have in the past two months returned to the scene, once again promoting negotiations and possible new deals with Iran. Iran has agreed to work with the IAEA to dispel some of the principal fog about its past activities, and has allowed inspectors into its facility in Arak. These might seem to be positive developments, but both the history of nearly five years of dealing with Iran, as well as the immediate circumstances surrounding these developments, suggests otherwise. Most importantly, Iran remains firm in its rejection of the demand that it suspend uranium enrichment activities; indeed the only reason that it may be

considering a return to negotiations is if it was led to believe that the international community is willing to back down from this demand.

The first sign of a possible erosion of the determination on sanctions that the international community had displayed from late 2006 to early 2007 was the meeting that took place between the EU's Javier Solana and Iran's nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani in Ankara in late April. Although Iran remained in defiance of international demands, this meeting was aimed at exploring the prospect of a return to negotiations. The next sign of a pending change came in mid-May when

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*Javier Solana,
European Union
negotiator with Iran*

IAEA General Director Mohamed ElBaradei reacted to news that Iran was successfully spinning 1300 centrifuges by explaining that the rationale for further sanctions “has been overtaken by events.” Indeed, rather than taking this surprising development as the cue for harsher measures, he maintained that this was actually the time to *end* all pressure. According to ElBaradei’s logic, if Iran already *has* this capability and could soon move to industrial production, there is no longer any reason to demand suspension.


The initial Solana-Larijani meeting, described by both sides as “positive,” led to a second meeting, held in Madrid on May 31. At this meeting it was reported that Larijani had promised Solana that he would talk to the IAEA about information access and co-operation. Thus began a process with the IAEA, which led to an agreement on June 23 between ElBaradei and Larijani to draw up a plan of action on how to resolve questions about Iran’s nuclear program. Iran wanted this conditional on an end to the Security Council’s involvement in Iran’s nuclear file. Significantly, a third meeting between Solana and Larijani was held in Lisbon the very next day.

If the timing of these parallel meetings is not evidence in itself, Iran has made it very clear in its statements that these two processes (with the EU and the IAEA) are closely linked. When asked whether uranium enrichment was discussed at the Larijani-Solana meeting of June 24, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, answered that: “the time for discussing the issue of enrichment has come to an end. The issue of recognizing Iran’s right to enrich uranium is the question at present.” He noted that based on ElBaradei’s remarks, he expects the 5+1 (members of the Security

Council and Germany) to understand Iran’s nuclear realities and achievements. On the discussions with ElBaradei aimed at addressing the still unanswered questions about Iran’s activities, Hosseini made it very clear that the outcome of these talks depended on the results of negotiations with Solana. Thus for Iran, any deal with the IAEA depends on an understanding to be reached with the EU, and ultimately accepted by the permanent members of the Security Council.

The tide is moving in the direction of probable recognition and acceptance of some undetermined degree of uranium enrichment by Iran as the basis for a new round of negotiations. Attempts are already being made to lay the ground for justifying what would clearly be serious backtracking on the part of the international community – for example by reinforcing the distinction between enrichment for civilian needs and enrichment that could be used for military applications, and underscoring the (false) impression that these two activities can easily be kept distinct.

Three primary factors have facilitated what is very likely to be a problematic return to negotiations: Iran’s determined defiance for the past two years which has enabled it to achieve significant advances in its nuclear program that are now perceived as irreversible; the international community, which enabled this development due to its inability to present a united and determined front, thereby reacting with a too little, too late posture; and Iran’s current return to the more sophisticated approach that it so skillfully demonstrated in the past. This approach mixes defiance with a little cooperation on the less significant aspects of its program, for the sake of maintaining the more important gains that it has made.



Negotiations would no doubt be the way to proceed if Iran was actually looking for a deal. Unfortunately, there is no indication that this is the case, neither given Iran's past behavior in negotiations with the EU-3 nor its attitude since. All that is evident is Iran's steady progress through continued defiance, while the international community edges toward accepting these advances and altering its positions in kind. The US has been relatively quiet about these developments, although in late August Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns did say that the US intends to push hard for tougher sanctions, and would

never agree to stop all its efforts because of Iran's meetings with the IAEA. Nonetheless, Iran knows that a little cooperation at critical points goes a long way toward defusing the determination of the international community to confront it. And in practice, the US at present is more concerned with Iraq than with the nuclear issue. The result: Iran is calling the shots and actually shaping the response of the West, rather than the other way around. The unfortunate lesson to all future proliferators is that if they stay the course with a cool determination, they will overcome the international community.