

Iran's Nuclear Advances: The Politics of Playing with Time

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Over the past four years, one of the most frequently asked questions about Iran is when will it be able to go nuclear. Sometimes the focus is on the so-called “point of no return” or “technological threshold,” and sometimes the question is when it might actually be in a position to attain nuclear weapons, or mount them on long range surface-to-surface missiles. Speculation over this question has engendered any number of estimates as to how far advanced Iran’s nuclear program really is. The urgency of the question keeps analysts busy trying to assess the answer, but from the range of answers provided, one cannot escape the distinct sense that there is no one authoritative assessment.

Beyond the technical and intelligence aspects of this question, however, there are significant political and policy implications as well. Estimates provided over the years have been used by policymakers to justify their policy decisions and directions, and as such, they have played a central role in the diplomatic/political process itself.

Once the West – through the EU-3 – embarked on negotiations with Iran in 2003, it found itself engaged in a process that was very difficult to weather, let alone master. Structurally, Iran had the upper hand in the negotiations due to its determination and steadfastness, whereas the West was constrained by the fact that it represented many states with different and sometimes conflicting interests. But the West couldn’t acknowledge this – even to itself – and so it clung to

the belief that *it still had time*. One could chart a steady increase in its determination, but not at a pace that was fast enough to match Iran’s advances. And so it lagged behind, while shunning more determined action. And here is where the estimates played a significant role – there was always an assessment to quote that indicated there was still enough time to stop Iran through diplomacy.

As long as one could support the view that there was still time before Iran crossed the technological threshold, then there was still time for diplomatic initiatives – negotiations, and perhaps sanctions as well – to work, and there was no justification for emphasizing undue pressure in this regard or moving to harsher measures such as military action. Similarly, when more severe estimates were quoted, they were often brushed

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aside as exaggerations, as there was always a longer term estimate out there to justify continued diplomacy.

A report released in May, however, based on the IAEA visit to Natanz, indicates that the West is now perhaps out of time. According to this report, Iran is successfully spinning 1,300 centrifuges, and it may no longer be possible to stop Iran from crossing the technological threshold. The same people who were quoting estimates that there is still time for negotiations now say that time has run out and that there is nothing to be done about it. IAEA Director General ElBaradei has said that one of the purposes of uranium enrichment suspension – keeping Iran from attaining nuclear knowledge – “has been overtaken by events.” Accordingly, if Iran has passed the technological threshold, there is no longer any logic to insisting on suspension of uranium enrichment activities: once it has the know-how it is just a matter of time. Basically, ElBaradei seems to be implying that the international community now has no choice but to face the reality of a nuclear-capable Iran.

Since everyone knew that Iran was advancing its program, how is it that Iran advanced so far? How did the West fall into this trap?

The problem is that from late 2003, it seemed there were no good options for stopping Iran from advancing its program. The military option was favored by none, and the diplomatic option was slow and cumbersome. One of the problems with the diplomatic route was that the focus of negotiations was almost exclusively on something that in retrospect has proven to be virtually non-negotiable for Iran: namely, suspending uranium enrichment indefinitely. Thus, time was not used in a productive manner

and slipped by all too quickly. Not surprisingly, it became clear that Iran was beating the system. Had technical and technological estimates all been in the direction of more severe estimates, perhaps the efforts of the international community would have been more focused, and at least the turn to sanctions would likely have been much quicker. But because the West understood that it had difficulties as far as displaying a collectively determined approach, it perforce fell back on the less severe estimates. These justified delay of harsh action, but ultimately locked the West in a self-made trap on the basis of these generous timelines.

In recent months, estimates have been shortening the timeline, yet even in the face of these estimates, attempts were made to highlight that there is still time. The month of April provided an opportunity to juxtapose different statements on Iran's progress and to observe the reactions to them. In early April, Ahmadinejad proclaimed that Iran had completed the fuel cycle and was beginning industrial production. In late April, it was reported that according to a new US intelligence report, Iran would be able to achieve nuclear weapons capability (enough enriched uranium for a bomb) already in 2010, which advanced the timeline from 2015, a previous US estimate. While Ahmadinejad's proclamation was pronounced by most observers to be an exaggeration of Iran's advances, the latter estimate – which also claimed that Iran was more



advanced than previously thought – was received quite differently, and accepted as indication that time is likely running short. The difference between the two reactions is the difference between saying that time is short, but that there is still enough time to stop Iran if states show determination, and saying that time is up, and that either action is taken immediately or it will be too late.

Israel as well has conducted a very delicate balancing act between saying that there is not too much time for action and that there is still enough time for diplomacy. Israel has wanted to push for more concerted action, but also to discredit reports whereby Iran was more advanced than was thought, which would require an immediate determined response. Thus over the past four years Israel regularly attributed the shortest timeline for Iran going nuclear (if it was not interrupted in its work), and was even notably pleased when US estimates finally came into line with its own. At the same time, however, Prime Minister Olmert was quick to dismiss Ahmadinejad's proclamations of early April, saying that he doubted that Iran's program was as advanced as was claimed and that there was still time to stop Iran. Thus Israel wanted to emphasize that time was short, but wanted to keep the threshold still far enough away so that it didn't require immediate action. Olmert did not want to embrace the es-

timates that time was actually running out.

In light of the IAEA report, time now indeed seems to be running out. The point is that whatever the actual amount of time left, the true challenge is to put this time to effective use. Simply repeating the mantra that there is still time to stop Iran through diplomatic means does not help to stop Iran.

The record so far of attempts to deal with Iran through negotiations does not leave much room for optimism: while Iran has been playing *for* time, the international community has been playing *with* time. At this point, the international community must remain steady and determined on the course it chose in mid-2006. It should not yield on the demand to suspend all enrichment activities, but there is no time to negotiate this, as the Europeans would like. The international community must significantly step up sanctions through the UN Security Council and outside the UN framework and increase the pressure on Iran until it suspends its uranium enrichment activities. This should be Israel's clear message as well. Although El-Baradei is right that a significant advance has been made, time is not yet up, and this is exactly the time to step up (but not give up) the pressure on Iran. Stronger sanctions might not work, but anything less will be a clear victory for Iran.