

Progress in the Iranian Nuclear Program Alongside the Israel-Hamas war

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While the international community is focused on attempts to end Israel's war against Hamas, which benefits from support from the Iranian-led axis, a severe report published by the International Atomic Energy Agency ahead of an upcoming meeting of the organization's Board of Governors indicates that the Iranian nuclear issue is far from resolved. It appears that Western nations, led by the United States, still seek a political solution to the problem. At the same time, the increased tension between Washington and Tehran and the fact that the United States is entering a presidential election year significantly reduce the chances of a political resolution that would halt Iran's uranium enrichment progress.

In recent months the international community has focused on preventing a regional confrontation in the Middle East in light of the war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the assistance that Tehran and the resistance axis provide Hamas in the framework of the conflict. Against this backdrop, members of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors [convened](#) in Vienna, Austria on November 22-24, 2023, to discuss, inter alia, a [report published](#) on November 15 about Iran's progress in its nuclear program. Under routine circumstances, the report would presumably have grabbed headlines across the world because of its grave findings, but the conflict between Israel and Hamas has shunted it into the shadows. The international media, and even the Israeli media, ignored it entirely. And still, because it is so severe, and notwithstanding the focus of attention on the Gaza Strip, the Iranian nuclear issue cannot be ignored. Rather, it demands a serious, thoughtful examination regarding the future of Iran's nuclear program and effective and realistic ways to thwart its progress.

The report paints a very negative picture of Iran's worrying progress toward nuclear capability, including stockpiling material that has been enriched to a level of 60 percent. In concrete terms, the report points out that Iran has stockpiled 189.8 kilograms of material that has been enriched to a level of 60 percent and another 838.9 kilograms of material that has been enriched to 20 percent, from a total stockpile of enriched uranium in Iran that is estimated to be around 4,486.8

kilograms. The report adds that Iran is continuing to expand its enrichment facilities, including the Natanz plant, where there are already 15 cascades of advanced centrifuges (three IR6 cascades, six IR4 cascades, and six more IR4 cascades that are ready for operation). In addition, there are advanced plans to expand the Natanz facility, as well as the enrichment facility in Fordow. The report states that Iran refuses to make any progress toward implementation of the joint statement from March 4, 2022, refuses to hand over additional information about the so-called [open files](#), and is unwilling to work with the IAEA toward implementing the modified Code 3.1, which makes it hard for the organization to verify that Iran is not diverting nuclear material.

Part of the report deals with Iran's decision [to cancel the entry visas](#) of eight IAEA inspectors, recognizing that their absence would significantly impinge on the organization's ability to supervise the Iranian nuclear project. It seems that Iran made the decision in response to the decision by the European Union to extend the arms embargo imposed on the Islamic Republic, following criticism of Iranian policy at the previous IAEA Board of Governors meeting in September. The moves by Tehran and the IAEA highlight that any future measure enacted against Iran in the context of its nuclear program could lead to countermeasures by Tehran – perhaps even enriching uranium to a level of 90 percent – which would, in turn, deter the West from taking any other measures against Iran in this context.

Like the previous report, published in September 2023, the most recent report maintains the “negative atmosphere” when it comes to Iranian willingness to cooperate with the IAEA. Notwithstanding this negativity, however, it appears that the United States and other Western states want to avoid further deterioration in their relations with Iran. Proof lies in the [European statement](#) issued at the end of the IAEA Board of Governors meeting last month, which expresses “grave concerns” over Iran's behavior and warns the Islamic Republic that it cannot avoid paying a price should this behavior continue. In practice, however, the statement did not contain any concrete sanctions against Tehran – partly because of deep concern over regional conflagration and also in order to avoid perhaps irreparable damage to relations with Iran.

Over the past few months, Iran and the United States have reached a [series of understandings](#), whereby Iran committed not to enrich uranium beyond the 60 percent level, and, in exchange, it would receive funds frozen by various countries. The fact that Iran chose to continue enriching to that level, while, in the background, the US administration sought to [shirk these agreements](#) and stop the transfer of money from banks in Qatar to Tehran given Iran's involvement in the

war between Israel and Hamas, highlights the fragility of the agreements. At the same time, that Tehran chose to enrich only a few kilograms of nuclear material to a level of 60 percent since that agreement is perhaps a possible indication that Iran still holds out hope for a political resolution to the nuclear issue, which would provide some much-needed relief for the Iranian economy, or that it reflects Tehran's basic desire not to find itself in a position where it pays a price for its involvement in Gaza – especially in light of the massive US military presence in the region.

It now appears that the likelihood of the United States and Iran reaching a temporary agreement, let alone a long-term deal, over Iran's nuclear program has plummeted. Three factors have combined to increase tension between the two countries to such an extent that a deal seems close to impossible: Iranian involvement in the war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip; Iran's [directing Shiite militias in Iraq](#) to attack American forces, in part in an effort to pressure Israel to agree to a ceasefire; and the United States entering a presidential election year. In addition, the vocal criticism of Iranian behavior in Washington, including from some senior members of Congress, could even prevent any discussion of an agreement with the Islamic Republic. Moreover, it seems that Iran's involvement in the Gaza war will lead to even more sanctions being imposed by the US administration, which could further worsen relations between Tehran and Washington. It seems that the administration is currently making supreme efforts to avert a severe downturn in relations with Iran (by [extending the Iraqi exemption](#) on trading with Iran, for example), yet the chances of reaching an agreement over the nuclear program have declined significantly.

Consequently, it appears that Iran's enrichment program will continue unimpeded. Iran has no interest in stopping this progress as long as it does not enjoy significant economic relief, and it seems almost certain that the political hot potato of the Iranian nuclear program will have to wait for the next administration – assuming, of course, that there is no Iranian nuclear breakout before the presidential election in November 2024.

At the same time, it is possible that the war in Gaza will bring the Iranian leadership to rethink the country's nuclear program if it leads to a significant shift in Iran's view of its strategic environment and/or its perception of the threats it faces. At present, it seems that Iran has not identified any such change, given that it seems to be enjoying immunity with regard to the Gaza war and because there is now even less chance that Israel will attack Iran directly without the United States – an eventuality that [Tehran viewed as unlikely](#) in any case. This, along with Iran's

underlying desire to avoid actions that would increase pressure on its economy or force the United States to take kinetic action will likely lead to measured Iranian progress in its nuclear program, with no military red lines crossed. However, changes in the strategic environment, such as increased pressure on Iran, certainly over its nuclear program, dramatic changes in the Iranian-led axis as a result of the war, and/or the nature of US deployment in the region could prompt a reassessment on this issue – with the emphasis on whether to enrich uranium to a level of 90 percent.

While Israel's war against Hamas may have highlighted the need to increase pressure on Iran over its regional behavior, emphasizing that it will have to pay for the actions of its proxies, the nuclear issue must not be ignored. The West and Israel would be well advised to rethink their strategy and formulate ways of preventing Iranian progress in its enrichment program, while at the same time increasing regional pressure on the Islamic Republic. Although the fact that Iran is approaching an enrichment level of 90 percent appears to negate the West's ability to take any action against the nuclear program, over fears that additional pressure would encourage Iran to cross the nuclear Rubicon and enrich to military-grade levels, it is the West's inaction that allows Iran to expand its nuclear program in a way that means it will be impossible to roll it back under any circumstances. Overall, Iran's behavior during the Israel-Hamas war highlights the concern in Tehran over external threats to its sovereignty. Thus in any future scenario, Iran must be made to understand that the "big stick" is poised above it and will be used if it tries to cross the Rubicon and develop military-grade nuclear capabilities. In this context, the US military presence in the Gulf is hugely significant. At the same time, the depth and width of the Iranian enrichment program forces the understanding that there is no "knock-out blow" that can set the project back years, and that it is worth considering "carrots" for Tehran to agree to limit its program – with the understanding that a policy of pressure alone is unlikely to convince the Islamic Republic to roll back its nuclear program.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen