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IRAN'S SLIPPERY NUCLEAR SLOPE**Ephraim Asculai and Ephraim Kam**
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Under heavy European pressure and a threat to refer the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council, Iran has backed down -- at least temporarily. In late November, Iran and the British, French and German governments concluded an agreement regarding Iran's suspected nuclear activities. According to that agreement, Iran will suspend all its enrichment activities, especially "the manufacture and import of gas centrifuges and their components; the assembly, installation, testing or operation of gas centrifuges; work to undertake any plutonium separation; or to construct or operate any plutonium separation; and all tests or production at any uranium conversion installation." The suspension will remain in effect while negotiations on a new long-term agreement continue between the European governments and Iran. Those negotiations will begin in December 2004 and will cover nuclear, technological, economic and security issues. Meanwhile, Iran has announced that the suspension has begun and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has confirmed that announcement.

The new agreement has deferred the crisis stemming from Iranian nuclear activities. It

reflects Iran's sensitivity to its international posture. It also signals that Iran prefers to back down when it faces a unified international front and a threat of economic sanctions and perhaps military action, as well. More importantly, the suspension, if protracted, might prolong, once again, the timetable for Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb.

At the same time, however, the new agreement has clear deficiencies. First of all, it is obvious that the agreement is no more than a temporary one. It speaks about the suspension of the nuclear activities, not their end. It explicitly presents the suspension as a "voluntary confidence-building measure and not a legal obligation." And following the conclusion of the agreement, the Iranians have emphasized that they will never put a definitive end to their nuclear program.

Although the suspension has no time limit, its duration is directly linked to the duration of the upcoming negotiations between Iran and the European governments. These negotiations are expected to be difficult and will include sensitive nuclear issues. Hence, if negotiations collapse, Iran can claim the right to end the suspension. In fact, the Iranians speak about a suspension of no

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more than several months.

Thirdly, Iran concluded a similar, though less comprehensive suspension agreement with the Europeans in October 2003, and then violated it in June 2004. At that time, the Iranians claimed that the Europeans had not kept their promise to remove the issue from the IAEA's agenda. The same sort of claim could be raised again.

Thus, there is a good reason to expect that sooner or later, Iran will resume its suspected nuclear activities. Furthermore, there are no indications that Iran has made a strategic decision to change course and abandon its quest for a nuclear weapon. All the indications are that this latest agreement is a tactical move on the part of Iran, aimed at easing the pressure on it and driving a wedge between the European and American governments. For that reason, it should also be assumed that Iran already has clandestine nuclear sites, in which it continues its activities.

This assumption is shared by the latest report of the IAEA Director General to his Board of Governors. That report begins with a summary of the findings of the inspectors of Iran's nuclear program. In detailing the findings, the IAEA spells out the many cases of concealment, delay in allowing site-access (apparently until after concealment activities at the site are completed), and failure to report, declare, or provide information. There are still many issues (such as the origin of highly enriched uranium particles) that remain unresolved to the satisfaction of the inspectors. These "breaches," to use the term employed by the IAEA, are by themselves sufficient grounds for declaring Iran to be in non-compliance with its NPT obligations. The reasons for not doing so are purely political.

Furthermore, the report states that "The Agency is...not yet in a position to conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities

in Iran. The process of drawing such a conclusion... is normally a time consuming process." However, there is no logical basis for that sort of assertion, certainly not in a vast country like Iran, ruled by the type of regime now in power. Investigative verification can only state that no indications have been found attesting to the presence of illicit materials and activities. It is not possible to verify the absence of undeclared materials or activities, and by claiming the converse, the IAEA is misleading the world.

It is therefore not surprising that the Bush administration seems to be very suspicious of the European-Iranian agreement and has taken steps to increase the pressure on Iran in recent days. President Bush himself blamed Iran for speeding up "processing of materials that could lead to a nuclear weapon." And Secretary of State Colin Powell has stated that US intelligence agencies believe that Iran is working on ways to modify missiles to carry nuclear warheads.

Even if only some of the new information regarding Iran's activities is proven to be accurate, the international community will find itself on a collision course with Iran. The crisis can only be postponed if the present atmosphere of dialogue prevails. If Iran is indeed advancing toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons, as seems to be the case, there will come a time when no non-military international action can turn back the wheel. That situation can be avoided only by continuing pressure of other sorts. But except for the supply of nuclear fuel for power reactors – on the condition that irradiated fuel is sent outside Iran for reprocessing – any of the other inducements currently under consideration will only constitute a reward for non-compliance.

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