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EUROPE AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR FUTURE

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On January 12, the European Union resumed trade talks with Iran following an 18-month suspension. On the same day, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors arrived in Iran to investigate suspicions that nuclear weapons-related experiments had been conducted at Parchin army base, near Tehran. According to an Iranian official, the scope of the visit was limited, and not all was open to inspection at the suspect site.

These are the latest developments in the ongoing international efforts to circumscribe Iran's nuclear program. Negotiations between the "EU-3" (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) and Iran are currently at the center of these efforts, and the issue at stake is whether Iran is willing to abandon its military nuclear ambitions in return for significant economic benefits. The outcome, which will depend on the resolve of the EU-3 in the face of Iran's intention to persist, will determine the future course of the Middle East and the rest of the world, as well.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are clearly reflected in the extent of its program, its past record of concealment, its ongoing effort to hinder inspection, and its determination to continue with uranium enrichment-related activities. By contrast, the EU-3 have shown no similar

determination. The European stance has been and remains to reach a "suspension" (which is, by definition, a temporary measure) of Iran's enrichment program, with some minor additions. The Europeans have never unreservedly condemned Iran's military nuclear ambitions, probably out of political considerations, i.e., the desire to be seen by Iran as an "honest broker," rather than from any real confidence in Iran's innocence. But by failing to do so, they expose themselves to suspicions of acting from ulterior motives.

In advance of the next round of negotiations, a senior Iranian official told a press conference that if the negotiations do not go well, Iran will resume uranium enrichment in March, though it could postpone this until June 2005. In the same breath, the official stated that Iran "would never scrap its nuclear fuel cycle work...If the Europeans' problem is the fuel cycle, then negotiations are useless." This is probably a very clear statement of Iran's true position, and the EU-3 must consider it as such. They must then evaluate the risk to the world should Iran be permitted to continue with its weapons program, of which uranium enrichment is an essential step. In the current negotiations, the EU-3 need to focus on three central aims:

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A. Iran must completely abandon its military nuclear ambitions;

B. Iranian activities must be rigorously verified;

C. Any potential for the reconstitution of Iran's military nuclear program must be eliminated.

Accordingly, Iran should shut down and dismantle its indigenous fuel-cycle activities, its future reactors must be of proliferation-resistant types, and all irradiated nuclear fuel must be returned to the suppliers. Strict verification and a continuous search for undeclared facilities, materials and activities must be enforced. Although Iran has signed the IAEA's Additional Protocol, it did not ratify it, and in any case, the Protocol does not guarantee a comprehensive and thorough search for undeclared materials, facilities and activities. Thus a new agreement must be reached on this issue. In return, nuclear fuel supplies for Iran's nuclear reactors could be assured at world-market prices. This should be all. Following the assured implementation of such an agreement, however, Europe would probably resume comprehensive economic and trade links with Iran.

The best possible outcome of negotiations would be for Iran to acquiesce in EU demands and agree to implement fully the three points. But if it refuses, that could precipitate a major crisis, and the issue could then, as a first step, be brought to the Security Council. But if the EU-3 cave in at any point and agree to be more lenient in any of their demands, this would be the opening Iran is waiting for, and it would seize the opportunity to go on with its nuclear project, either overtly (implementing its "rights" to an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle) or clandestinely, thereby only postponing the inevitable.

In either case, if Iran refuses to abandon completely its military nuclear ambitions, the problem will be reduced to the timing of an inevitable crisis. Notwithstanding the natural inclination to postpone any impending confrontation, dealing with the issue sooner

would be the only way to avert a broader and steeper strategic deterioration in the region.

For if Iran continues with its weapons development program and acquires or even comes close to acquiring a military nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia will probably feel compelled to seek a nuclear "umbrella" from Pakistan, through an existing or new cooperation agreement. Others in the region, particularly Egypt and Turkey, will be similarly driven to obtain such a capability. Iraq will also be impelled, in the more distant future, to redevelop a WMD capability. Iran's neighbors already feel threatened, and this threat perception will only intensify if the EU-3 give in to Iran in a way that leaves the outlook for the future highly uncertain. Moreover, many of these neighbors are oil-producing nations, and any threat to them will have a profound influence on the rest of the world. In brief, the regional dynamics precipitated by a nuclear-capable Iran explain why it is necessary to deny Iran that capability.

The critical variable in all this is the resolve of the EU-3. They must now realize that the time is past for further delaying measures or for any more "confidence-building-measures," such as permission for the conduct of a long-awaited inspection of a suspect site. The current discussions need to constitute the culmination of the negotiations rather than simply the beginning of yet another phase in an endless process. However, based on previous performance, there are no solid grounds for expecting that this is the position that the EU-3 will instinctively take. To act otherwise, they will need active encouragement from important other actors in the international arena, including the United States, Russia, China and Japan and, most notably, Iran's own neighbors.

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