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INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS TO IRAN'S NUCLEAR PRONOUNCEMENTS

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On April 11, Iranian officials began to make public statements detailing Iran's achievements and future plans for its indigenous uranium enrichment program. The gist of these and later proclamations was: Iran has operated its first gas-centrifuge "cascade," comprising 164 centrifuges, and has achieved a 3.5% uranium enrichment in this cascade; Iran plans to construct, as a first stage, several cascades totaling some 3000 centrifuges; Iran plans to construct a full-scale, 54,000-centrifuge uranium enrichment plant; Iran is developing and testing the next-generation P-2 centrifuge; Iran has accumulated some 110 tons of uranium hexafluoride – the feed stock for the centrifuges; and Iran will not reverse course or heed the international calls to renew the suspension of its enrichment program.

These declarations constitute a landmark in Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. They indicate that Iran has mastered the basic technique of uranium enrichment and could, if it so desires, enrich uranium to any level. Coupled with repeated evidence of belligerency against Israel and threats to obliterate it, they give added weight to the suspicion that Iran's nuclear program has but one purpose – to produce

nuclear weapons. Otherwise, any threat to obliterate Israel would be totally hollow.

The international reaction to the statements coming out of Iran ranged from commendation to condemnation of Iran's achievements. Some states called for serious measures against Iran while others insisted that the proper solution to the issue could only be achieved through diplomatic negotiations. The latter reaction ignored Iran's declaration that it is now a nuclear power and that the issue is not negotiable. But even among those who did acknowledge Iran's new posture, there were those who excluded the option of military action.

Two other reactions warrant further comment. The first one concerns the opinions of the US intelligence community. On April 13, the New York Times quoted unnamed American analysts whose assessment was that a "nuclear Iran is years away." According to this article, "The United States government has put that at 5 to 10 years, and some analysts have said it could come as late as 2020." This could well be true if Iran's purpose is simply to put 54,000 centrifuges online and produce nuclear fuel for its Bushehr power plant, which has yet to be commissioned. However, if its purpose is the production of

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nuclear weapons, the above estimate is highly dubious.

Assuming a modest rate of centrifuge installation of 1000 per year, a reasonable calculation of the time needed to acquire the necessary amount of High-Enriched-Uranium (HEU) and assemble the components leads to the conclusion that Iran could potentially complete its first nuclear explosive device by mid-2010.¹ This, of course, is a technical calculation; actual progress would depend on the local and international political situation. Should Iran refrain from going immediately from the 3.5% enrichment value to HEU, it could simply accumulate the low-enriched uranium gas and then quickly take the final enrichment step to HEU. That could be done within the framework of Iranian commitments to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and under the safeguards agreement it holds with it. If and when it wanted to produce HEU, Iran could either secretly divert some of its 3.5%-enriched stock and enrich it to HEU or it could withdraw from the NPT and then rapidly enrich all of its stock to HEU. Even if Iran does not have a parallel secret enrichment program, it now has the technical expertise to take these steps, which the current safeguards agreement could not detect.

Of course, other American experts are quoted in

the New York Times as describing the new Iranian claims as "little more than vacuous political posturing." That might, indeed, be the case, but absent verified technical information, that description could also be wishful thinking on the part of those who wish to postpone the inevitable crisis. Experience suggests that that approach is not more prudent than operating on the basis of a reasonable worst-case scenario.

The IAEA's reaction and its present role in the crisis are hard to define. The IAEA has stated that after three years of probing, it cannot verify that Iran's nuclear program is entirely peaceful (which is logically impossible to do) but that it has (contradictory to the IAEA's own February 2006 report) found no hard proof of efforts to build atomic weapons. But given its past failures in Iraq (prior to the first Gulf War) and in Libya, as well as its currently limited verification capabilities, there is little chance that the IAEA would be able to unearth hard evidence of the real purpose of Iran's nuclear program. And since it is unwilling to rely on circumstantial evidence, including the record of Iranian noncompliance in the past, to indict Iran for developing nuclear weapons, there is little chance that the IAEA will play an important role in the future, notwithstanding the preferences of some Security Council members.

As for the Security Council itself, its permanent members seem close to agreeing on the meaning of the destructive route Iran has taken but they have yet to agree on the way to deal with this issue. And as long as they remain divided, Iran will continue to have a free hand to develop nuclear weapons.

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¹ Let us assume a rate of enrichment of one BQ (Basic Quantity of material for one bomb) per 3000 centrifuges per year. At the end of the first year, there would be 1000 machines installed but no HEU yet produced. At the end of the 2nd year, there would be 2000 machines installed and 1/3 BQ produced. At the end of the 3rd year, there would be 3000 machines installed and a total of 1 BQ produced. Assuming one more year for the machining of the 1st batch, and we arrive at mid-2010 as the possible date for the first Iranian nuclear explosive device. At the end of the 4th year, at the same rate of installation, there would be one additional BQ produced, and this would increase over time.