



INSS Insight No. 729, August 6, 2015

The Long Road is the Shortest Road:

Iran's Possible Routes to a Bomb

Avner Golov

The Vienna agreement between Iran and the world powers is intended to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, although the agreement reduces the chances of this occurring within the coming decade, it does not completely preclude the possibility that Iran will acquire a bomb. In fact, the agreement actually provides Iran with an alternative route for doing so, thereby increasing the chances of this occurring during the second decade of the agreement. In this sense, the title chosen by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon for his book – *The Long Short Road* – might aptly describe the nuclear strategy adopted by Iran when it signed the agreement.

Until the signing of the agreement, Iran had two routes to acquire nuclear weapons. The first route, a “breakout” to a bomb, refers to Iran’s use of all its abilities to cross the nuclear threshold quickly and openly. Since the beginning of the Iranian nuclear program, the likelihood that such a scenario would be realized was extremely low. Iranians learned from the experiences of Iraq and North Korea and developed a strategy to progress by means of the safest – as opposed to the shortest – route to a bomb. Over the past decade the Iranian nuclear program advanced cautiously, maneuvering between internal and international political constraints. Only in the event of an existential threat against the regime, or an international crisis viewed by Iran as a window of opportunity posing little risk, was Iran expected to deviate from its cautious approach and “break out” to acquire nuclear weapons.

The nuclear agreement, which extends the breakout time to a bomb from a number of months to one year, increases the level of risk to Iran posed by such a scenario. It does not, however, constitute an appropriate response to the danger of an Iranian breakout. According to the agreement, Iranian violations of the terms of the agreement will be dealt with by a multilateral framework and result in the re-imposition of sanctions. However, the feasibility of sanctions actually being snapped back is highly questionable in light of Iran’s expected determination to break out to a bomb. Economic sanctions, which by nature require an extended period of time to wield a significant effect, are a tool with

limited effectiveness in this context, especially in the event that the Iranian regime feels an imminent threat to its survival. An international punitive mechanism may also prove to be ineffective if at the time in question the international community is engaged with another crisis. A danger likewise exists that the more Iran continues to develop its nuclear research program and more advanced and efficient centrifuges, the greater the danger that the Iranian regime will choose to break out toward a bomb in the event that it feels threatened or is presented with a relatively low risk opportunity.

The second route, a “sneak out,” refers to secret Iranian nuclear activity conducted in parallel to declared activity that would allow Iran to cross the nuclear threshold slowly and secretly, thereby significantly minimizing the risks involved. In practice, over the years Iran has pursued this route. Because it is a continuous and slower strategy than the breakout scenario, the nuclear agreement addresses it more effectively. Nonetheless, the measures it institutes are far from ideal. Thus, in continuation of its longstanding strategy, Iran can be expected to engage in gradual violations of the agreement aimed at testing the awareness of the international community as well as its response threshold and response time. The nuclear agreement does not set an automatic response for “minor” violations, but rather stipulates the visit of IAEA inspectors – with Iranian agreement – to undeclared sites suspected of nuclear activity, and an enforcement mechanism that requires at least one country to act to re-impose sanctions. Then will the issue of American willingness to take action to enforce the agreement emerge, and when it does, it can be expected to face the opposition of Russia and China. During the negotiations with Iran, the United States argued that re-imposing sanctions without consensus would in practice result in their collapse. This assessment might be realized if in the future Iran decides to sneak out to a bomb.

Therefore, the agreement provides only limited measures for contending with these two potential routes to nuclearization. Perhaps even more serious, however, is that it allows Iran to advance along a third, combined route to acquire a bomb – a “step out.” If during the first decade of the agreement the Iranian government decides that it will not endanger itself by crossing the nuclear threshold, it can do so during the second decade, exposing itself to only minimal risk, by gradually expanding the scope of its nuclear program for five more years, until most of the imposed restrictions are lifted. As noted by President Obama, this will reduce the breakout time to near zero. In this third situation, Iran could cross the nuclear threshold by means of quick action (as in the breakout scenario) but do so without being discovered (as in the scenario of sneaking out to a bomb). This scenario presents decision makers in the United States with new challenges.

For example, in such a situation, the US willingness to stop Iran will be critical – particularly the ability to implement a military option in an extremely short period of time. President Obama has stated that the achievements of the military option would be limited and that its use would result in war in the Middle East. It is questionable whether

during the second decade of the agreement this option – which may be the only way to try to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons – will be any more attractive than it is today. An attack on the Iranian nuclear program, which will develop in accordance with the nuclear agreement on the basis of international legitimacy, will demand unequivocal evidence of Iranian violations and broad international legitimacy. Gathering the evidence and mobilizing the required international support will require time that the US administration will not have if it wants to stop Iran once Tehran chooses to step out to a bomb.

Given this threat, the United States must develop an appropriate response. First, it must rehabilitate the credibility of a military option in the form of a surgical strike. Even if the administration is guided by the assessment that employing this option will lead to war, statements to that effect should be limited, as they weaken the validity of the nuclear agreement, especially due to the fact that Iran is also not interested in a direct nuclear confrontation with the United States. In contrast to the lack of Iraqi and Syrian responses to attacks on their nuclear facilities, Iran can be expected to respond. However, its response – like in the nuclear realm – can be expected to be measured and cautious.

Second, and supplementary to the nuclear deal with Iran, determined efforts must now be made to stop the Iranian missile program before it acquires the ability to arm ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. If Iran succeeds in developing a nuclear bomb despite the stipulations of the nuclear agreement, the improvement of its missile program will be the final obstacle preventing it from becoming a nuclear power. The agreement signed between the world powers and Iran does not provide a sufficient response to the threat posed by the Iranian missile program, and stipulates that the related sanctions will be lifted in eight years. Limiting Iran's missile program may help to prevent an Iranian decision to cross the nuclear threshold, as such action could prevent it from translating its technological capacity in the nuclear realm into an operational nuclear missile program.

Israel's ability to take action against the three roads to Iranian nuclearization is currently limited. Therefore, it must strive to reach a side agreement with the United States focused on coordinating plans of action in the event of Iranian violations of the agreement, and on intensifying the intelligence cooperation between the two countries in an effort to cover the remaining blind spots in the supervision of Iran's nuclear program. An important aspect of this discussion should be planning a joint response to the challenge that the Iranian nuclear program can be expected to pose during the second decade of the agreement, once the primary limitations on its scope are lifted. Moreover, the return of the Israeli military option, in addition to the rehabilitation of the American military threat, will increase the effectiveness of the nuclear agreement as a result of the element of deterrence it carries with it, and will therefore reduce the chances of actually needing to use it. In this way, the chances of blocking Iran's long road to a bomb can be enhanced.