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Frequently Asked Questions on Iran's Nuclear Program

The Iranian regime continues to defy repeated international demands to halt its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) now has concluded that Iran has overcome technical difficulties and is producing enriched uranium at a level needed to fuel nuclear reactors. If true, this development would represent a major advance by Iran toward the production of weapons-grade uranium. As the leadership in Iran continues to issue increasingly belligerent rhetoric against the United States, Israel and the West, the urgency of stopping Iran's nuclear efforts remains more critical than ever. Below are frequently asked questions about Iran's nuclear program and current efforts to stop it.

Q: Don't we have time before Iran can produce nuclear weapons?

A: Time is quickly running out before Iran will have the technical expertise to produce nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has now concluded that Iran has overcome technological hurdles to developing nuclear weapons and is beginning to enrich uranium—which can serve as fuel for an atomic bomb—on a much larger scale than before. The IAEA said in its most recent report that Iran is operating 1,640 centrifuges, which are machines that rotate at supersonic speeds to enrich the uranium needed to produce fuel for nuclear reactors or bombs. The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization declared on April 10 that Tehran plans to install more than 50,000 centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear facility. If Iran achieves such a capability, it would ultimately be able to produce highly enriched uranium sufficient to produce dozens of nuclear weapons per year.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also has stated that Iran is working on a more advanced centrifuge that can significantly shorten the time Iran would need to produce highly enriched uranium, which could, with 54,000 centrifuges operating, produce enough highly enriched uranium for up to 50 nuclear weapons a year. These developments reflect the regime's determination to develop a nuclear bomb as quickly as possible.

Q: What are Iran's international non-proliferation obligations?

A: As a non-nuclear member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has legally foresworn obtaining nuclear weapons and is obliged to declare all nuclear facilities and activities on its soil, and to have all of its nuclear activities under the safeguards of the IAEA. The IAEA resolution passed in September 2005 found Iran in violation of its obligations.

Q: How has Iran violated these obligations?

A: Iran has had a clandestine nuclear program for nearly 20 years until it was exposed in 2002. The long list of nuclear activities Iran kept hidden from the IAEA includes: clandestine construction of a pilot uranium enrichment facility; construction of a large-scale enrichment facility; construction of a facility to convert uranium yellowcake into uranium hexafluoride gas—which then can be enriched to

create nuclear bombs; construction of a heavy-water reactor that can be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons without having to master the uranium enrichment process; importation of the design and components for centrifuges used to enrich uranium; importation of 1.8 tons of uranium yellowcake; experimentation with the separation of plutonium; experimentation with polonium (a radioactive isotope used to trigger and boost nuclear explosions); and the importation of instructions on how to weaponize highly enriched uranium.

Since these revelations, Iran has continued to block the access of IAEA inspectors at some suspect sites and refused to answer continuing questions from the IAEA. Iran has also ignored two recent U.N. Security Council imposing sanctions on the regime for its failure to end its uranium enrichment.

Q: Isn't it possible that Iran is only interesting in acquiring nuclear energy, not nuclear weapons?

A: Iran's claim that its enrichment of uranium aims solely to develop peaceful atomic energy rings hollow: Its nuclear program actually runs counter to its energy and economic interests. Tehran's claims are further discredited by its nearly 20-year effort to hide its program from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), its rejection of several generous offers to help build a peaceful Iranian atomic energy program and the continuing military links to its nuclear efforts.

Using nuclear power for electricity is far more expensive than oil and gas for Iran, which has 90 years of oil and 220 years of gas reserves at current production rates, according to a 2006 Department of Energy (DOE) report. It does not make economic sense to invest billions of dollars in uranium enrichment and heavy water facilities, as Iran is doing, when nuclear reactor fuel can be purchased much more inexpensively on the international market.

Iran's claims that it is developing civilian nuclear power production capabilities to become energy independent are also undermined by the fact that the regime only has enough domestic uranium reserves to support the country's proposed nuclear program for 10-20 years. However, these resources are more than enough to supply material for an arsenal of atomic bombs. What's more, beyond the Russian-built Bushehr reactor, for which Moscow is supplying the uranium fuel, Tehran has not begun construction on any nuclear power plants to actually use the enriched uranium it seeks to produce.

Tehran has rejected several generous packages from the international community to help it develop a civilian nuclear energy infrastructure. Iran immediately rejected an extensive August 2005 proposal from Britain, France and Germany (EU-3) that included an offer of long-term assistance to Iran's civil atomic program, including nuclear fuel supply assurances. Russia last year also offered to set up a joint uranium enrichment center on Russian soil to produce nuclear fuel for export to Iran—an offer that Iran similarly rejected.

Q: What is the current status of international efforts to pressure Iran to stop its nuclear program?

A: In December 2006, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1737, which imposed mandatory sanctions on Iran under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, thereby declaring that Iran's atomic program represents a threat to international peace and security. In March 2007, the Council passed Resolution 1747, which imposed another round of even tougher sanctions aimed at cutting off access to the funds Iran needs to develop its nuclear program. In light of Iran's ongoing defiance of the resolutions, the U.N. is now weighing a third round of sanctions.

Q: Is the Iranian regime susceptible to economic pressure to stop its nuclear program?

A: The Iranian regime's weakest point is its economy, which is highly dependent on its petroleum and natural gas sector. As recent protests and criticism of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

make clear, the Iranian regime must be wary of public dissatisfaction. Two thirds of Iran's population is under the age of 35, and many are either unemployed or underemployed. Inflation is rampant, while the mullahs are perceived as corrupt, enriching themselves at the expense of ordinary people. Targeting the lifeblood of Iran's economy could help crystallize the choice confronting the Iranian regime between pursuing nuclear weapons and mounting popular economic disenchantment.

Q: What impact have sanctions had on the Iranian regime to date?

A: The prices of basic foods such as beef, poultry, fruits and bread have increased by 25 percent and housing costs have risen 30 percent in recent months, resulting in rising public discontent and anti-government protests. In this context, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has allowed criticism of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's nuclear and economic policies not only in reformist newspapers, but also in his own state-run media.

As a result of these pressures, Iran is projected to spend more money on subsidies for food, housing and gas—in an effort to quell discontent over the economy—than what it makes in oil and gas revenue. International oil firms are also reconsidering investments in Iran because of the two U.N. Security Resolutions and warnings by the United States that they could be hit with U.S. sanctions if they invest in Iran's petroleum and natural gas sector.

Q: What further sanctions can be imposed?

A: The U.N. Security Council is now considering a third round of sanctions that may include a mandatory ban on arms sales and export credits to Iran, a ban on foreign investment in Iran and a ban on the export to Iran of refined petroleum.

Q: Why don't we just talk to Iran to solve the dispute over its nuclear program?

A: The United States and its allies have made repeated efforts in recent years to reach out to Iran in hopes of solving a range of disputes diplomatically, including the recent offer of wide-reaching negotiations if Tehran suspends its uranium enrichment-related activities. The formal U.S. position since the early 1980s made clear that the United States was prepared for a dialogue with authorized official parties in Iran, with all issues on the table, including Iran's role in fostering terrorism and undermining Israeli-Arab peace efforts, as well as its nuclear efforts. Iran has never accepted such a dialogue. Moreover, when Iran has entered into negotiations, such as the talks with the European Union, it has used them as a tactic to postpone and delay the imposition of sanctions, all the while aggressively expanding its nuclear infrastructure—and then bragging about having done so.

Entering into a dialogue before Iran has suspended its uranium enrichment would allow Tehran to use the dialogue as way to continue advancing its nuclear program. If a direct dialogue is pursued, such talks should not serve as a replacement for additional diplomatic and economic sanctions if Iran continues to defy the international community.