

FAQs

August 30, 2007

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) has concluded that Iran may have 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 its increasingly belligerent rhetoric against the United States, Israel and the West, stopping Iran's nuclear efforts grows more urgent 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 highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has now reported that Iran appears to have overcome technological hurdles to enriching uranium and is now producing low enriched uranium to fuel nuclear power plants on a much larger scale than before. The IAEA said in its most recent report that Iran is operating close to 2,000 centrifuges, which are machines that rotate at supersonic speeds to enrich the uranium needed to produce fuel for nuclear reactors or bombs.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks at the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility about Iran's rapid nuclear progress.

A top Iranian official said in July that the Islamic Republic is domestically producing centrifuges for uranium enrichment—a key step toward developing nuclear weapons. “All parts of centrifuges are built inside Iran,” said Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. “Each part is built in various parts of the country. Then they are assembled at one place. Iran's nuclear technology is native and it cannot be eliminated.” These developments may indicate that Tehran is making significantly rapid progress in its nuclear efforts.

Q: How many centrifuges is Iran planning to install to produce enriched uranium?

A: 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. If the Iranian president's boasts are true, then the regime may ultimately have the potential to produce enough highly enriched uranium for up to 50 nuclear weapons a year.

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. Iran 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 conducted 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 fuel nuclear bombs; construction of a heavy-water reactor that can be used to produce plutonium (an alternative route for nuclear weapons); importation of the design and components for centrifuges used to enrich uranium; importation of 1.8 tons of uranium yellowcake; experimentation with plutonium separation; experimentation with polonium (a radioactive isotope used to trigger and boost nuclear explosions); and the importation of instructions on weaponizing 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 resolutions imposing sanctions on the regime for its failure to end its uranium enrichment. As the Security Council now considers a third sanctions resolution, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has declared that even 300 resolutions would not dissuade the country from ceasing its nuclear activities.

Q: Isn't it possible that Iran is only interested 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 has agreed to supply the uranium fuel, Tehran has

not begun construction on any nuclear power plants to actually use the enriched uranium it seeks to produce.

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 is experiencing open signs 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.

Stuart Levey, the Treasury's top anti-terrorism official, said recently that mounting financial sanctions against Iranian companies tied to nuclear activities, weapons proliferation and terror funding are bearing fruit. "We believe that there is a real potential that these sanctions will have the effect of changing the government of Iran's mind about the defiant policy it is currently pursuing," Levey said.

Q: What further sanctions can be imposed?

A: The U.N. Security Council is now considering a third round of sanctions that may include further travel bans on Iranian nationals, a mandatory ban on arms sales and limitations on export credits to Iran and limitations on foreign investment in Iran.

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.

Iran is using this tactic once again through its recent agreement with the IAEA to provide the agency with information about its nuclear program that it has been seeking for years. The agreement does not require Iran to suspend its enrichment of uranium as the Security Council has demanded. U.S. Ambassador to the IAEA Gregory Schulte said such “cooperation that is partial, conditional, and only promised in the future is not enough. Cooperation that allows Iran to proceed developing the capacity to build nuclear weapons is also not enough.”

Entering into a dialogue before Iran has suspended its uranium enrichment would undermine UN Security Council decisions and allow Tehran to use the dialogue as a 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.