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The Importance of Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran

Rather than suspend its enrichment of uranium as required by multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions, Iran continues aggressively to expand its nuclear capabilities. A comprehensive and rapid American-led campaign of crippling sanctions—including final passage in Congress of important sanctions legislation—holds the best prospect of persuading Iran's leadership to abandon its nuclear weapons quest. Below are some frequently asked questions concerning the Iranian threat and the role sanctions can play in preventing a nuclear-armed Iran.

Q: How do we know that Iran is even pursuing a nuclear weapons capability?

A: Revelations about Iran's efforts throughout the years to obtain nuclear technology provide convincing evidence that despite Iranian denials, Tehran is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.

As early as the late-1980s, senior Iranian military officials traveled to Pakistan to meet with notorious nuclear proliferator A.Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear program. According to a recent report in *The Washington Post*, based on documents and statements from Khan himself, Ali Shamkhani—a founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps—traveled to Islamabad and demanded three complete nuclear bombs. Pakistan instead gave Iran bomb-related drawings, parts for centrifuges and a secret worldwide list of suppliers.



Iran has repeatedly declared its determination to continue its nuclear program.

Indeed, despite Iranian protestations that obtaining nuclear weapons was forbidden by a fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran actually sought to obtain the weapons during his lifetime – and during the presidency of the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

In October, President Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy held a joint press conference to reveal the existence of a secret uranium enrichment facility near Qom. At that time, Obama explained that the reactor facility was too small to produce the necessary uranium for a nuclear power plant, stating, “The size and configuration of this facility is inconsistent with a peaceful program.” The only explanation is that Iran was attempting to set up this facility to enrich uranium to a weapons-grade level.

Iran's refusal of a U.S.-backed proposal to transfer its low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for reprocessing for use in a medical reactor also is a clear indication of its intentions. Instead of accepting

this deal, Iran began enriching the uranium to the 20-percent level necessary to make the medical isotopes. However, Iran does not have the technology to convert this uranium into the necessary fuel rods for the medical uses. Currently, only France and Argentina have that capability. As President Obama said, this rejection shows that “despite their posturing that their nuclear power is only for civilian use, they, in fact, continue to pursue a course that would lead to weaponization.”

The most recent report on Iran’s nuclear program by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supports the president’s statement. The report cites “extensive” information collected from a variety of sources over time demonstrating that Iran had worked on the necessary missile technology for a nuclear weapon. Expressing concern about Iran’s “past or current undisclosed activities,” the report concluded that the IAEA can no longer verify the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program.

Q: Why is it important for the United States to increase sanctions on Iran?

A: The danger posed by an Iranian nuclear weapons capability and Tehran’s rejection of negotiations demand that the United States immediately impose new crippling financial, economic and diplomatic sanctions on Iran. A comprehensive and rapid campaign of sanctions, led by the United States, holds the best prospect at this time of persuading Iran’s leadership to abandon its nuclear weapons quest.

Iran’s possession of a nuclear weapons capability would have devastating consequences for U.S. interests in the Middle East and would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region. Preventing a nuclear-armed Iran is critical to preserving American strategic credibility, protecting American citizens from the threat of nuclear proliferation and supporting efforts to secure an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Iran’s rejection of U.S. and international engagement efforts clearly demonstrates Tehran’s desire to continue its illicit nuclear efforts. Given the protracted nature of Security Council negotiations—more than two years have passed since the Council last sanctioned Iran—and the likelihood that new U.N. sanctions alone will not change Iran’s calculus, the United States must move quickly to impose unilateral sanctions.

Q: Is it too late to stop Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon? Should we focus on deterring and containing Iran?

A: It is not too late to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability. Based on information from international inspectors, Iran has not yet fully mastered the technology needed for a nuclear weapons capability. However, Iran is rapidly closing in on achieving this capability and therefore the United States must take quick action to stop Iran’s illicit nuclear pursuit.

Given the nature of the Iranian regime, its instability and its ideological extremism, the United States cannot base its policy on the hope Iran will forswear use of a nuclear weapon under any circumstances. Iran’s regime has already demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice large numbers of its own people to achieve regime objectives—an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Iranians were needlessly killed during the Iran-Iraq war—making deterrence a risky proposition. As Vice President Joseph Biden recently said, “...you cannot take a chance to let that occur.”

Iran’s mere acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability will have its own drastic negative ramifications for U.S. national security. Iran with a nuclear weapons capability would likely spark a regional nuclear-arms race and mark the death knell of the global non-proliferation regime. The Iranian regime would be emboldened to increase support for its terror-sponsoring ally Syria, and its proxies, Hamas and Hizballah. These Iranian allies would also be reinforced by the belief that a nuclear-capable Iran would be able to deter outside powers from responding to terrorist actions. Iran with a nuclear weapons capability would also jeopardize the world’s two most vital sources of energy: the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin.

Q: Isn't a military strike the only way to stop Iran's nuclear program?

A: As President Obama has repeatedly stated, all options should remain on the table for dealing with Iran. However, tough sanctions that are strictly enforced still remain the best option at this time to persuade Iran's leaders to alter their course. If crippling sanctions were imposed and enforced to their full strength, the United States alone has the ability to cause the collapse of the Iranian economy. If such action were taken, the leadership of Iran would finally be put to the ultimate test of choosing between a nuclear weapon and political-economic ruin.

Sanctions targeting Iran's imports of refined petroleum are already starting to have a real impact—even before final passage of the legislation—and could cause Iran to change course. Iran's historic suppliers of gasoline, companies like Vitol, Trafigura, Glencore, BP, Royal Dutch Shell and Reliance, have all recently ceased Iranian sales. Iran has therefore been left to depend on less reliable partners, mostly in Asia, and at higher costs. Once congressional legislation targeting the refined petroleum imports is passed, Iran's remaining suppliers will have to rethink their activity.

Q: What is Congress doing to increase the pressure on Iran?

A: The House of Representatives and Senate have both passed tough legislation to impose new sanctions on Iran to persuade the regime to suspend its nuclear program and seriously engage in negotiations with world powers. The House passed the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA) in December 2009 by a vote of 412-12. The bill seeks to curtail Iran's ability to import refined petroleum products through the imposition of sanctions on companies providing refined petroleum to Iran or transporting, insuring, or financing refined petroleum deliveries. The Senate in January 2010 passed by voice vote the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act, which includes similar IRPSA provisions. The Senate bill also includes provisions that authorize state pension divestment efforts (the House passed a separate bill that includes these) and measures aimed at stopping the diversion of sensitive technologies to Iran.

A congressional "conference committee" now needs to meld the Senate and House versions into one bill. Once the Senate and House resolve their differences, they can pass a final bill that will go to the president for his signature.

The key sanctions included in these bills are provisions that will increase the pressure on Iran by restricting its ability to purchase refined petroleum products. Despite being one of the largest producers of crude oil in the world, Iran lacks adequate refining capability to meet its own domestic needs for gasoline, diesel and aviation fuel. Iran is forced to import 30 to 40 percent of its refined petroleum. The bills do include provisions allowing the president to waive the implementation of sanctions if he determines such a move is vital to the national security interests of the United States.

Q: Won't additional sanctions hurt average Iranian citizens and push them to support the regime?

A: The Iranian people are already being hurt—by their own government's repression, corruption, and economic mismanagement. Inflation and unemployment are both very high, and fall disproportionately on the 65% of the population that is under the age of 30. The current regime in Iran has long blamed its internal problems on outside interference from the West. There is no doubt that the regime will continue to do so regardless of whether sanctions are increased or decreased. However, the people of Iran have largely dismissed this argument. Attempts to blame the upheaval resulting from the Iranian presidential election on Western interference fell on deaf ears as protests continue.

The people of Iran—especially in light of the brutal crackdown following last year's elections—are more likely to oppose the regime, because they know the actions of the regime have led to Iran's

isolation. The goal of the sanctions is not to hurt the Iranian people but to force the regime to decide between providing a better life for its people or continuing with its illicit nuclear weapons pursuit.

Q: What is the administration's view on new sanctions and congressional legislation?

A: The administration is pursuing new sanctions through the U.N. Security Council and through a group of like-minded nations. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said the administration supports “the purpose and the principles” of the sanctions legislation being considered by Congress targeting Iran’s dependence on refined petroleum. “We need to enlist every possible tool that we can to bring to bear on this,” said Clinton. Congress and the administration are working together to address a handful of remaining issues to pave the way for final passage of the legislation.