

# Iran's Nuclear Ambitions and Turkey

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## I. A Brief Look at Iran's Nuclear Development

Iran's nuclear activities trace back to the end of the 1950s. A member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1958, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in July 1968, and the Iranian Parliament ratified this treaty in March of 1970. In regard to implementation, Iran established the Tehran Center for Nuclear Research in 1967 and bought a 5 MW light water reactor from the U.S. This reactor was built by the American company AMF, and began operating the same year. AMF also provided the fuel -- enriched uranium -- to the Iranians.

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) was established in 1974 and still remains the institution primarily responsible for Iran's nuclear activities. Also in 1974, Iran signed an agreement with America's Stanford Research Institute to produce 20 thousand MW of energy in 20 years. Following this deal, Siemens, Kraftwerk Union, Eurodif and other European companies signed nuclear agreements with Iran. The current political and technical criticisms looming over Iran's nuclear program were not on the agenda in those years. Iran had never faced any problem in regard to its nuclear activities before the Revolution of 1979; rather, it utilized its good relations with the U.S. and other Western countries as a way to cooperate with them in the field of energy production. Nevertheless, the Iranian leadership considered its nuclear capabilities to be a guarantee against the superpower threat. When the Western countries ceased to support Iran's nuclear activities, Iran turned to the East,

### Summary

The Iranian nuclear issue has serious implications for regional and international security and as such requires a comprehensive analysis of the Iranian domestic power structure, foreign policy decision making process and nuclear diplomacy. Iran has a complex internal decision making process and the management of nuclear issue makes the situation more complicated. This policy brief argues that the Iranian nuclear issue is as much a regional and international issue as it is part of the domestic power struggle in Iran. It also argues that Turkey should follow the nuclear issue closely and play a constructive role in opposing the proliferation of WMD including nuclear weapons in the Middle East while maintaining good relations with Iran.

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approaching China and Russia. Iran signed a deal with Russia in 1995 for finishing the nuclear facilities in Bushehr.

On August 14 2002, some members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq in Washington declared that Iran was pursuing nuclear enrichment activities in its nuclear facilities in Natanz and Erak. In the aftermath of this accusation, the U.S. administration carried the issue to the UN Security Council with the support of EU countries, and persuaded China and Russia to adopt two Resolutions calling for sanctions against Iran. The Iranian government responded that it would not suspend nuclear enrichment activities but is ready to cooperate in confidence building measures.

In December 2007, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) pointed out that nuclear activities in Iran do not have a military content. However, it also underlined that Iran continues to engage in uranium enrichment activities, contrary to the UN Resolutions. The U.S. National Intelligence Estimate report, released on December 3, 2007, included the findings of 16 American intelligence agencies and stated that Iranian nuclear activities were being pursued with peaceful purposes.

## **II. Decision Making Process Surrounding the Nuclear Issue**

In the Iranian power structure, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei is the sole authority for making important strategic decisions in Iran. However, it is difficult to argue that there is a single person dictatorship in Iran, as is the case in some Middle Eastern states. Although Khamanei has extensive constitutional rights, his close consultation circle is influential in the decision-making process. One important figure in this circle is former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani was appointed, after his presidential term, by the Supreme Leader to lead the prestigious Expediency Council. This institution consists of influential religious figures, old ministers, and high-level bureaucrats and intelligence officers. It is officially responsible to the Leader, and provides ideas for the work of the Iranian parliament. After Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency, the head of the Higher National Security Council (NSC), Hasan Rohani, resigned from his post and started to work for Rafsanjani in the Expediency Council. This institution turns a critical eye toward Ahmadinejad's policies. It plays an important role in nuclear issues through its influence on the parliament and the bureaucracy. Another important name is Ali Akbar Velayati, former minister of foreign affairs and current foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader. Velayati is closer to Rafsanjani than Ahmadinejad. Mohsen Rezaei is the other influential person involved in determining Iran's foreign and security policies. Rezaei was chief commander of the Iranian army of Revolutionary Guards for 15 years. He was appointed as general secretary of the Expediency Council under Khatami's presidency.

Another influential institution involved in shaping Iran's nuclear policy is the National Security Council. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the NSC was formed and remains active for the sole purpose of effectively managing the nuclear issue. Distrustful of the reformist control of foreign policy under Khatami's rule, the NSC came to dominate the nuclear issue, backing its power with influential names from security diplomacy such as

Hasan Rohani, Hussein Mousavian, and Sirus Naseri. The NSC preserves its authoritative role in the development of nuclear policies. The Iranian Army of Revolutionary Guards also has a role in Iran's nuclear fate. The issue of nuclear power is perceived to be a national security matter and some nuclear facilities are located within military zones. The only directly related technical institution is the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, led by the former minister of energy, Golamreza Agazade. This institution provides technical assistance and consultancy to the related bodies.

Given this complex web of relations within the Iranian state structure in regard to the nuclear issue, one should not think that the government is out of the picture. As a matter of fact, considerable change has taken place in the nuclear issue after Ahmadinejad's presidency. The issue is also a battleground for domestic power struggles and, as such, directly influences the power structure in Iran. Discussions about the nuclear issue have exerted pressure on Iran's reformist politicians and remain poised to contain their influence in the political arena. The nuclear issue has been utilized to foster anti-reformist sentiments in Iran's parliamentary and presidential elections. For instance, allegations circulated that reformist politicians failed to handle this vitally important issue properly. The reformist bloc advocated dialogue with the international system and suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment activities if necessary. This attitude was portrayed as a betrayal of Iranian interests. Such allegations continue and include accusations that the reformists are allying with Western powers in an attempt to monopolize nuclear technology in their hands and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear technology. The highly compartmentalized decision-making process on the nuclear issue did not allow Khatami to make any changes in the nuclear policy in his two subsequent terms. After Khatami, the reformist bloc lost power. There are, however, still political parties and presidential candidates that maintain a reformist agenda in Iranian politics.

Iranian radio and television broadcasting is under strict state control; it is not possible to hear any criticism of Iran's nuclear policy. The only opposition comes -- in a weak form -- from reformist newspapers. The atmosphere of censure and fear in Iran's academic environment also prevents experts and academics from raising their concerns on the issue. The Iranian state media broadcasts programs that focus on the role and importance of nuclear technology for development and growth. The nuclear issue is compared to the nationalization of Iran's oil resources, and the nuclear program is presented as a phase in Iran's continuous struggle against domestic and foreign enemies intent on preventing Iranian development. The media propagates the idea of a double standard to the effect that Westerners do not allow Iran to acquire nuclear technology while so many others are using it freely. The media seeks to make the nuclear issue a matter of national pride, and it has been successful to some extent. One may also hear pro-nuclear ideas from some Iranians who live in exile due to their opposition to the Iranian revolution.

### **III. Iran's Nuclear Diplomacy**

Iran's nuclear diplomacy was not so dense from the 1990s, when Iranian nuclear activities recommenced, until 2002, the year in which the secret dimensions of its program were

revealed. However, changes in the international arena in the post-9/11 period made Iran and its nuclear activities one of the more contentious issues on the international agenda. Iran was just on the verge of its critical nuclear activities in 2003, when international pressure on the country grew enormously. At that time, centrifuges in Isfahan and Natanz were incomplete and nuclear stations were vulnerable to all types of air attacks. The IAEA publicized a report containing harsh criticisms of Iran's nuclear activities in this period. The report, published in September 2003, gave Iran a notice period of 50 days within which to ease suspicions toward its nuclear activities; it was regarded as the "September Shock" in the national press. The essence of the Iranian nuclear diplomacy was and is to deal with the increasing U.S. pressure on Iran. The worst case scenario for Iran has been a UN Security Council Resolution, for a collective action against Iran.

The report file was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Iranian National Security Council because of concerns that the issue would be sent from the Agency to the UN Security Council. Hasan Rohani, the Council Head, was appointed as the nuclear chief negotiator on October 6, 2003. Rohani, who completed his PhD in law at Glasgow University, had worked together with Rafsanjani and Khamenei as one of the most effective war strategists during the Iran-Iraq War. The perception was that Iran's nuclear activities could lead to an attack on the country. Against this looming threat, the government attempted to apply a strategy that would save time and soften international pressure. In Hasan Rohani's view, the diplomatic purposes of the new crew were manifold: to prevent the file from being sent to the Security Council, to ease the suspicions among the international community in order to eliminate a potential military attack, to develop cooperation with the Agency, to save time to complete nuclear activities and provide protection for nuclear facilities, and to have others accept that Iran has the legitimate right to have a nuclear fuel transformation system and to pursue uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes.

The Iranian administration pursued two strategies in order to eliminate suspicions regarding its nuclear activities and prevent potential attacks. In the short-run, it attempted to gain time by sitting at the negotiating table with France, England and Germany, the so-called European Troika, in order to divide and pacify the Western coalition. At the same time, it attempted to have better relations with the IAEA and to propagandize in the international arena that its nuclear activities are conducted for peaceful purposes. During these diplomatic attempts, Iran had the backing of a large number of countries. The concurrent diplomatic visits of the foreign ministers of Germany, France and England in October 2003 to Tehran and their engagement in negotiations were extraordinary for even Europe. Iran also pursued proactive diplomacy with international organizations (the IAEA, the UN, the Non-Aligned Movement) as well as the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and the neighboring countries. For these purposes, Iran signed the agreements of Paris and Sadabad and suspended its activities for uranium enrichment.

One of the priorities of Iran's nuclear diplomatic efforts was to break up the Western block. To that effect, Tehran started negotiations with the EU and announced that it had suspended its uranium enrichment activities "voluntarily" in order to reduce tensions. In fact, it had

consistently rejected the Agency's demands and argued that it had the right to engage in such activities within the framework of the NPT. The Iranian government had achieved a level of comfort on its prior issues of security, saving time by halting such activities with a political agreement, and establishing a record of its willingness. As Rohani professed later, even though Iran had made the decisions about these strategies earlier, it attempted to secure concessions from Europe by making these issues a component of the negotiations. These strategic efforts were partially successful. The European countries guaranteed that the file would not go to the Security Council from the Agency as a response to Iran's suspension, and this situation lasted for two years.

Having seen the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran approached these issues with considerable calm. Sitting on the table with the EU, Iran was able to receive further support from countries like China and Russia. Eventually, only a few countries remained behind the U.S., a proponent of harsh politics and tough talk towards Iran. At the same time, Iran was engaged in nurturing close relationships with the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the Iranian administration tends to exaggerate the support of such countries as Malaysia, South Africa and Venezuela. Despite its initial slowness and unwillingness, the Government's engagement with the Agency eliminated some of the suspicions. Yet there is still need for substantial confidence building measures.

#### **IV. The Nuclear Issue in Turkish-Iranian Relations**

During the heated debates over the Iranian nuclear issue in international circles, the Iraqi situation was the top priority of Turkish foreign policy makers. Turkey followed and continues to follow a multidimensional policy line intended to contribute to stability and security in Iraq, and to prevent the territorial disintegration of Iraq. Turkey considers Iran to be a natural ally in its fight against the PKK terrorists, who had operated in Iran under the name of PJAK, and in the effort to preserve Iraq's territorial unity. Turkey's attempt to decrease security dependence on the U.S. provides motivation for Turkey to forge an independent policy line to solve Iran-related security problems.

Turkey's Iranian policy in general and its policy toward the nuclear issue in more specific terms follows a European model. Turkey opposes the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and does not want Iran to acquire nuclear capability. Turkish concerns center around the possible change of military balances in the region. Such a change could trigger a nuclear race, compounding the current problems in the Persian Gulf. The Arab states worry about the rise of Shia influence and even a "Shia Crescent" in the region stretching from the Palestinian territories to Pakistan. Similarly, Turkey considers such a division dangerous for the security and stability of the region as a whole, and aims to bridge the gap between Sunni Arab states and Iran. The Turkish attitude aims to find a solution to regional problems through regional networks by utilizing the effective means of a multi-dimensional and dynamic diplomacy. Turkey urges Iran to continue its confidence-building measures and close cooperation with the IAEA.

Turkey's role as a facilitator became apparent during the talks between the EU and Iran on the nuclear issue. Ankara hosted EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, head of the IAEA, Muhammed Baradei, and Iran's former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani. Ankara made it clear that it does not oppose any peaceful nuclear activity in Iran. First and foremost, it aims to guarantee that Iran will handle the issue in a smooth and non-problematic way. In this sense, Turkey emerges as a honest broker from the perspective of both Iran and the international community.

Turkish foreign policy makers know that recourse to non-diplomatic means to solve the nuclear issue in Iran would be disastrous for the region, and would prove costly for Iran's neighborhood -- including Turkey. The rationale behind Turkey's diplomatic initiatives is to motivate Iran to follow a responsible line in the nuclear issue and to adopt a non-confrontational policy line with the international community. This approach does not allow the nuclear issue to become a negative factor in bilateral relations. There has been no tension between Turkey and Iran in regards to the nuclear issue over the last three years. The latest IAEA and NIE reports are likely to support Turkey's efforts to continue to have good relations with Iran.

### **Recommendations**

Turkish policy toward the Iranian nuclear issue has been more or less satisfactory for all sides. Turkey has called for a careful and non-confrontational policy line, and urged the sides to adopt rational and constructive positions. There has been no major criticism in the Iranian media regarding Turkey's attitude toward the nuclear issue. By contrast, the Iranian media frequently publishes articles critical of Russia and China. Given the points above, the following recommendations should be considered to develop a constructive approach in the Iranian nuclear issue.

- Turkey should make it clear that it is against the spread of WMD, including nuclear weapons, in the region. This should be the bottom line in Turkey's critical engagement in the Iranian nuclear issue.
- Turkey should put more emphasis on the solution of problems between Iran and the IAEA. Turkey should warn the Iranian administration that the nuclear file in the UN Security Council can be sent back to the IAEA.
- Turkey should take on a more active role in the observance of Iranian nuclear activities. Ankara may explain to the Iranian side that Turkey's involvement would serve to advance confidence-building measures in the nuclear issue. Iran already accepts third country observers; Turkey's participation is likely to produce positive results.
- Improvement of Turkish-Iranian trade relations would enable the Iranian side to reap the benefits of international trade and investment. Turkey faces many difficulties in



gas deals and other contracts; however, these relations may also serve as a learning process for the Iranian side.

- Iranian policy makers closely follow Turkey's "zero-problem policy" in its neighborhood. Turkey's success in minimizing problems with its neighbors has created a certain degree of sympathy in Iran. Turkey's new civil-economic engagement in the Middle East may motivate Iranian foreign policy makers to adopt a responsible policy line in the region. Once Iran accepts a role in a stable and secure regional environment, the Iranian administration would be more willing to keep the tensions at a low level.

Iran is a key country for securing peace and stability in the Middle East. The U.S. administration itself has admitted several times that Iran has positively contributed to the solution of certain problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor is Iran as isolated as the international media sometimes portrays. Turkey is active in mediation attempts in the region. Indeed, the recent period witnessed the visits of several odd couples, such as Peres-Abbas and Musharraf-Karzai, to talk peace and cooperation in Turkey. In short, Ankara can play a role in bringing the U.S. and Iran closer to one another. If one considers the Iranian Spiritual Leader's recent statement that "the enmity with the U.S. will not last forever," Ankara may help the U.S. and Iranian administrations to overcome some of the prolonged problems that plague the relations between the two countries.