



The High International Stake in the Iran Nuclear Talks

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Summary

As negotiations on a comprehensive agreement on the Iran nuclear issue intensify before the current six-month deal expires on 20 July, it is instructive to remember what is at stake by way of noting comparisons with other proliferation cases. The two states that most recently developed nuclear weapons – Pakistan and North Korea – exemplify several of the reasons for concern about Iran also going nuclear: the weapons might be transferred to others, including terrorist groups, even if not authorized; they may spark a proliferation cascade; they may encourage adventurism; and they will make a nuclear war more likely. This is not to predict that Iran will go down that path; only to illustrate the dangers. Iran does not have nuclear weapons today and there are ways to ensure, within reasonable confidence, that it would not be able to produce weapons before it would be too late for powerful nations to take forceful action. The components of a solution may prove to be too politically difficult for both Tehran and Washington. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that continued diplomacy and deterrence will dissuade Iran from crossing the threshold of nuclear latency to nuclear acquisition.

Iran's Case is Unique

1. From the outset, it must be noted that Iran does not have nuclear weapons and there is no conclusive evidence it is determined to build them. To the contrary, Iran insists that it does not seek nuclear weapons. If circumstances

warrant, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei can reverse his fatwa forbidding such weapons, but at present it has the writ of law.¹ A nuclear hedging status that enables nuclear weapons to be built in a short period of time may for the time being meet Iran's strategic goals.

2. Central to the current negotiations is the question of how long a lead time is satisfactory to Iran and acceptable to its antagonists. The United States and its allies seek a period measured in years before Iran could produce enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a bomb. Among influential analysts, 6-12 months is seen as a more realistic goal.² Iran, for its part, wants something close to the status quo; at least this is what can be deduced from its insistence that no nuclear equipment can be dismantled and no facilities abandoned. Reputable US-based analysts assess that as Iran fulfils the conditions of the Joint Plan of Action,

¹ For an explanation of the fatwa, see Seyed Hossein Mousavian "Globalising Iran's Fatwa Against Nuclear Weapons," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55:2 (April–May 2013), pp. 147–62. For an alternative view, see Ali Ansari, "To Be or Not to Be: Fact and Fiction in the Nuclear Fatwa Debate," *RUSI Analysis*, 25 February 2013, <https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C512B4D561318E/#.U2DNtYFdXT0>.

² See, for example, Institute for Science and International Security, "Defining Iranian Nuclear Programs in a Comprehensive Solution under the Joint Plan of Action," 15 January 2014, http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Elements_of_a_Comprehensive_Solution_20Jan2014_1.pdf; and Robert J. Einhorn, "Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran: Requirements for a Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement," Brookings Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Series, Paper 10, March 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/03/31-nuclear-armed-iran-einhorn>.

agreed on 27 November 2013, and eliminates its stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium, the break-out period could be as low as two months.³ Experts in the United Kingdom, which has conducted gas centrifuge enrichment of the kind adopted by Iran, say it would take Iran longer than this to produce a bomb's worth of HEU, given the operational difficulties in undertaking such complicated, dangerous work for the first time. For purposes of comparison, however, the theoretical timelines are a useful standard.

3. Apart from the unknowns concerning how long it would take to weaponize the fissile material, the prospective timeline for an Iranian nuclear weapon can be calculated based on Iran's declared facilities. Even before the Joint Plan of Action intensified inspection frequency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had near-weekly access to Iran's declared enrichment facilities and reported quarterly on Iran's progress. We know how many centrifuges of what types are installed, how many operate and how well they function. It is not known, of course, whether Iran has additional centrifuges at hidden facilities, but Iran has a poor record of keeping hidden facilities clandestine; the enrichment plants at both Natanz and Fordow were discovered by foreign intelligence agencies.

4. Compared to the states that have pursued nuclear weapons in the past two–three decades, Iran's openness to inspections is unique. This cooperation is far from complete; Iran has refused to comply with IAEA rules about early notification of new nuclear facilities, or to accept the safeguards Additional Protocol or to provide satisfactory answers to questions about past nuclear activities of a "possible military dimension" (the IAEA's diplomatic term for what appears to have been weaponization work). These transparency issues are among the topics being addressed in the current nego-

tiations. By contrast India, Israel and Pakistan had no IAEA inspections to shine a light on their fissile material production capabilities. North Korea belatedly accepted IAEA inspections in 1992, but refused to allow access to sites that could have confirmed suspicions of unreported plutonium production.

5. There are, of course, many other differences between Iran and previous proliferation cases. Similarities include an embattled threat perception and a black-market pursuit of nuclear-weapons-related technologies. The purpose of drawing comparisons with other cases is not to predict similar futures but to illustrate the dangers of what could transpire.

The Danger of Sharing Nuclear Weapons with Terrorists

6. The North Korean case is instructive in illustrating the dangers of nuclear proliferation. One concern about Iran going nuclear, for example, is that the nuclear weapons might end up in the hands of terrorists. Nonsense, say some pundits: what rational state would give up control of such prized possessions and open itself to severe retaliation if they were used? This is a fair question. Yet North Korea, no less a rational actor, has threatened to do just that. In a pull-aside conversation with a US negotiator in 2003, a senior North Korean diplomat ominously warned that his country had nuclear weapons and might transfer them.⁴ Two years later Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan told an American reporter that the US "should consider the danger that we could transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists."⁵

7. During that time, North Korea was already helping Syria establish a nuclear weapons program by building a plutonium-production reactor similar to the one at Yongbyon.⁶ In light of the civil war now engulfing Syria, it is fortunate

³ Patrick Miglierini, David Albright, *et al.*, "Iranian Breakout Estimates, Updated September 2013," Institute for Science and International Security, 24 October 2013, http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Breakout_Study_24October2013.pdf. See, in particular, Table 5, p. 13; the authors calculate that using all installed centrifuges at Natanz and Fordow and employing a three-stage enrichment process with use of the 3.5 per cent low enriched uranium (LEU) stockpile and no 20 per cent LEU, the break-out time is 1.9-2.2 months. In Senate testimony on 8 April 2014, US Secretary of State John Kerry referred to public estimates of a two-month break-out period. See Patrick Zengerle, "Kerry says Iran nuclear 'breakout' window now seen as two months," Reuters, 8 April 2104.

⁴ James A. Kelly, "Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Programs," testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 15 July 2004, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2004/34395.htm>.

⁵ Selig Harrison, "N. Korea Warns of Nuclear Proliferation Possibility: U.S. Scholar," Kyodo News Service, 9 April 2005, available at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/N.+Korea+warns+of+nuke+proliferation+possibility%3A+U.S.+scholar.-a0131327343>.

⁶ "Background Briefing with Senior U.S. Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement," 24 April 2008, available at <http://www.cfr.org/syria/background-briefing-senior-uzsz-officials-syrias-covert-nuclear-reactor-north-koreas-involvement/p16105>.

that this program never came to fruition, the Israeli air force having bombed the reactor in September 2007 before it could become operational. North Korea may also have provided nuclear cooperation to Iran⁷ and to Myanmar,⁸ though the evidence is far from conclusive. A nightmare scenario in the event of a North Korean implosion is that its nuclear assets might be seized by warlords and offered for sale on the black market. Al Qaeda's interest in nuclear weapons heightens the concern.⁹

8. Consider as well the case of Pakistan, where nuclear engineer Abdul Qadir Khan and his associates transferred nuclear weapons technology and parts to at least three nations. In at least one case, the trade to North Korea of centrifuges in exchange for *Nodong* missiles, the transfer was done on behalf of the state. Khan's sales to Iran did not have the same degree of Pakistan government involvement, but did have state acquiescence. Khan's last known deal, to Libya, was more of a straight commercial transaction, but at least some officials had to know about his transport of equipment and uranium gas to Libya, if not the weapons design he transferred in a dry-cleaning bag.¹⁰

9. Admittedly, the circumstances that led to Khan's case were unique to Pakistan, and North Korean diplomats may not have been serious when they spoke of transferring nuclear weapons to terrorists. But the fact that one nuclear-armed state allowed repeated transfer of its nuclear-weapons technology and another threatened it illustrates the possibility of what could happen if yet another state, in this case Iran, acquires nuclear weapons. The dangers are not limited to developing countries. In the United States in the early 1960s, 100kg of bomb-grade uranium went missing from a plant whose owners had close personal and commercial ties to Israel. There are allegations that Israel stole the highly enriched uranium.¹¹

In Iran, similar foreign transfers cannot be ruled out, especially among Revolutionary Guards where corruption is rampant and links well-established to foreign groups that employ terrorist tactics. As in the case of North Korea, one also cannot rule out the possibility that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons and goes through another revolution, the weapons might similarly be seized by contesting factions and seen as an asset worth selling or transferring for safe-keeping.

The Danger of a Proliferation Cascade

10. There is concern that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons it could spark a proliferation cascade. Saudi Arabian statesmen have made it clear that if Iran gets a bomb, the kingdom will have to follow suit.¹² Egypt and Turkey have also been mentioned as the next dominoes if their rival middle power Iran were to go nuclear. By refusing to accept the Additional Protocol or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) until Israel signs the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Egypt already gives the impression that it is keeping its options open. Turkey has a cleaner non-proliferation record, but many Turkish strategists say Iranian weapons acquisition would force them to reconsider nuclear options. A Middle East proliferation cascade is by no means inevitable and, given the low technological starting places for most of the states concerned, would take time.¹³ Yet the danger is real.

11. It might be noted that Israel's presumed nuclear-weapons status did not result in a proliferation cascade. Yet it was at least partly why at least four Arab states themselves pursued nuclear weapons. Egypt abandoned its weapons program in the late 1960s on economic

⁷ Mark Fitzpatrick, "New clues – but no proof – on Iran's illicit nuclear trade," *The National*, 6 September 2011.

⁸ "Interview with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton," *China Post*, 23 July 2009, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/asia/regionalnews/2009/07/23/217522/p2/Interview-with.htm>.

⁹ Rolf Mowatt-Larssen. "Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction Threat: Hype or Reality?" Belfer Center for Science and International Studies, Harvard University, January 2010, <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/al-qaeda-wmd-threat.pdf>.

¹⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "A.Q. Khan and Onward Proliferation from Pakistan," chapter three of *Nuclear Black Markets: Pakistan, A.Q. Khan and the Rise of Proliferation Networks* (London: IISS, 2007).

¹¹ Victor Gilinsky and Roger J. Mattson, "Did Israel steal

bomb-grade uranium from the United States?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 17 April 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/did-israel-steal-bomb-grade-uranium-united-states7056>.

¹² See, for example, "Saudi Prince Says Gulf States Must Balance Threat From Iran," Reuters, 23 April 2014, <http://gulfbusiness.com/2014/04/saudi-prince-says-gulf-states-must-balance-threat-iran/#.U1oVs1VdXT0>, and "Prince Hints Saudi Arabia May Join Nuclear Arms Race," Associated Press, 6 December 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-may-see-nuclear-weapons-prince-says.html?_r=0.

¹³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the Shadow of Iran* (London: IISS, 2008).

grounds; Iraq and Syria were forcibly deprived of their nuclear-weapons-related facilities in 1991 and 2007, respectively; and Libya was persuaded to give up its program in 2004. If Iran were to join Israel in acquiring nuclear weapons, there would be renewed motivation for nuclear status in at least parts of the region.

12. In North East Asia, North Korea's nuclear tests have not caused its neighbours to go nuclear. Yet Pyongyang's nuclear provocations have given a number of politicians in both Seoul and Tokyo reason to talk openly about nuclear weapons. In South Korea, former presidential candidate Chung Mong-joon has argued strongly that the South should reintroduce US tactical nuclear weapons as a bargaining leverage against the North and as a means of putting pressure on China to do something about the North's nuclear program.¹⁴ In opinion polls in 2012 and 2013, 66 per cent of South Koreans said they supported developing a nuclear weapons program.¹⁵ In Japan there is far less support for a domestic nuclear weapons program, but the nuclear taboo is showing signs of fraying.¹⁶

13. Both South Korea and Taiwan sought to develop nuclear weapons in the late 1960s and 1970s before they desisted under US pressure. Japanese bureaucrats have occasionally looked into the idea, including in 2006,¹⁷ and concluded it made no sense because Japan was already protected by the US nuclear umbrella and because developing a nuclear weapons program would rupture relations with Washington. These reasons remain irrefutable. As long as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan believe US extended deterrence is credible, they will not go nuclear. But if North Korea becomes more aggressive, if the China shadow looms darker and if the US presence recedes, the cost-benefit analysis of nuclear programs will change. Similar circumstances could also cause Saudi Arabia to rethink its strategic options.

¹⁴ David E. Sanger, "In U.S., South Korean Makes Case for Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, 9 April 2013.

¹⁵ Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "The Fallout : South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea's Third Nuclear Test," 24 February 2013, <http://en.asaninst.org/issue-brief-no-46-the-fallout-south-korean-public-opinion-following-north-koreas-third-nuclear-test/>.

¹⁶ Peter Symonds, "Is Japan Developing a Nuclear Weapons Program?" *Global Research*, 7 May 2013.

¹⁷ "Nuclear arms card for Japan," *Japan Times*, 29 April 2013.

The Danger of Bomb Acquisition Fomenting Aggression

14. It is often assumed that nuclear-weapons status would embolden Iran to become more aggressive towards neighbours. Iran is already seen as a regional troublemaker. In propping up Bashar al-Assad, Iran has enabled him to conduct atrocities against the Syrian people. In building up Hezbollah, Iran has destabilized Lebanon and turned the course of the Syrian civil war. Iran is a key support base for Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹⁸ Through the Quds force of the Revolutionary Guards, Iran has fomented militias in Iraq¹⁹ and assisted Houti rebels in Yemen.²⁰ There is also evidence that Iran has sought to provide arms to violence-prone factions in Bahrain.²¹

15. Nuclear-armed status does not necessarily make quarrelsome countries more aggressive. North Korea has been belligerent throughout its history, for example. Yet the case of Pakistan is an example of how states that acquire nuclear weapons can become more adventuresome. In the past three decades, India and Pakistan have reached the brink of war five times. The presence of nuclear weapons contributed to calming the crises, but in an example of the "stability/instability paradox," those weapons have also encouraged risk taking. In 1999, for example, a year after testing nuclear weapons, Pakistani paramilitary forces crossed the Line of Control and took up positions in a mountainous sector of Kashmir. There is strong reason to believe that the Pakistan Army felt emboldened by its nuclear deterrent to take risks. New Delhi responded by deploying roughly 200,000 troops, which prompted a similar escalation by Pakistan. In the ensuing tensions, Indian and Pakistani officials exchanged direct or indirect nuclear threats no fewer than 13 times. While both sides may have sought to keep the conflict limited, this outcome was far

¹⁸ Matthew Levitt, "Iran's Support for Terrorism Worldwide," statement to joint hearing of the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, 3 March 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-support-for-terrorism-worldwide>.

¹⁹ "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *New York Times*, 22 October 2010.

²⁰ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, 6 February 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34170.pdf>.

²¹ Frank Gardner, "Arms Ship Seizure Heightens Bahrain Fears," BBC, 9 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25664217>.

from certain. According to former White House officials, there was a real potential for a nuclear war.²²

The Danger of Nuclear Use

16. There is a concern that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it may use them, particularly against Israel. It would not be logical for Iran to do so; use against a nuclear-armed state would be an act of national suicide. When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be wiped off the map, he did not mean obliterating the nation through warfare. He meant that a fair election involving all the people of Palestine would vote for a non-Jewish state. But the detestable language many Iranian leaders employ about Israel²³ gives reason for pause for those who live within distance of Iranian ballistic missile range. Notwithstanding intentions, nuclear use as a result of mistakes, misperceptions and miscalculations cannot be ruled out.

17. The nuclear taboo that has prevailed since 1945 fortunately means there is no comparative data on the connection between nuclear proliferation and nuclear use. In the cases of both North Korea and South Asia, however, there is a real possibility of nuclear war erupting. North Korea is unlikely to use the weapons in an offensive campaign to reunite the Peninsula. Here, too, it would be suicidal. Like all nuclear-armed states, North Korea insists that its nuclear weapons are for deterrence and state survival. But it is easy to imagine circumstances of conflict escalation in which the North Korean leaders believe that they need to use the nuclear weapons in a last-ditch attempt to ward off defeat.

18. In recent years, the possibility of a nuclear exchange in South Asia has increased due to a lowering of the nuclear threshold to include non-existential threats. Ten years ago, Indian army officers developed a "Cold Start" plan for a quick mobilization in order to respond to terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan by launching a conventional incursion by several integrated battle groups about 65km across the border. To deter such an incursion, Pakistan developed a short-range missile that it says

would be armed with nuclear weapons and used against invading tanks. The fact that India's civilian leadership has never endorsed Cold Start makes it no less threatening in Pakistani eyes. Because of the "use them or lose them" choice that could face local commanders, deployment of these systems can lead to rapid escalation if deterrence fails. India's nuclear posture calls for massive retaliation if nuclear weapons are used against Indian forces, even if they are operating outside India's borders.²⁴ There is good reason to worry about a devastating nuclear exchange in South Asia that could quickly lead to millions of deaths. Again, circumstances in Iran differ. The purpose of raising the Korean and South Asian examples is to demonstrate the fallacy of the argument, most prominently associated with the late Kenneth Waltz, that nuclear weapons proliferation promotes stability.²⁵

Negotiating a Solution with Iran

19. The question has been posed why so much attention is accorded to the Iranian nuclear issue when all problems that are posited about it possibly becoming nuclear armed are already evident in Pakistan and North Korea.²⁶ The answer is that Iran merits attention precisely because it does not yet have nuclear weapons. If attention is paid wisely, there is still a prospect for a peaceful solution.

20. Reaching a comprehensive solution to the Iranian issue will be intensely difficult, given how far apart the two sides are on what they consider to be essential to an outcome. The Western nations require deep cuts in the number of functioning centrifuges and want Iran to dismantle most of them, as well as to abandon the Fordow and Arak facilities, remove most of the stockpile of enriched uranium, come clean about past nuclear activities, and accept limits on its program for 20 or more years. Iran wants to keep Fordow and Arak for their intended purposes, as well as to keep all 20,000 current centrifuges intact and not to admit to any past weaponization work. As for the limits it is willing to accept, Iran wants the limitation period to last no more than five years. The two sides also differ on how to resolve accusations

²² Mark Fitzpatrick, *Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers* (London: Routledge for IISS, 2014), pp. 48, 56–59.

²³ Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Iranian Leadership's Continuing Declarations of Intent to Destroy Israel; 2009–2012," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, May 2012, <http://jcpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/IransIntent2012b.pdf>.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers*.

²⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

²⁶ Gideon Rachman, "Our obsession with Iran obscures the bigger threat," *Financial Times*, 25 June 2012.

of past nuclear weapons development work and how to lift the sanctions pressure on Iran.

21. Technical solutions can be found to most of the sticking points. The issue of the Arak research reactor, which would be able to produce a weapon's worth of plutonium annually, has been addressed by Iran's offer to redesign the reactor to reduce the plutonium output by 80 per cent.²⁷ In lieu of dismantlement, excess centrifuges or certain key parts of them could be sent outside the country for safekeeping. The Fordow facility could be converted to an enrichment R&D facility, as suggested by former senior State Department official Robert Einhorn.²⁸ He and others have argued that the size of the enrichment program should be scaled to Iran's legitimate needs for its civilian nuclear program.²⁹ At present and for the foreseeable future, those needs are very low since Russia has promised to supply all the fuel for Iran's only nuclear power plant. How long limits should be applied could be left to the IAEA to determine based on its ability to draw conclusions about no undeclared nuclear activity under faithful implementation by Iran of the safeguards Additional Protocol.³⁰ Iran need not be forced to confess immediately to all past nuclear weapons-related activity before a deal is concluded, but a process can be established for resolving the past issues.³¹ Whether there is political will in Washington and Tehran to accept such solutions is doubtful, however.

22. Lifting sanctions is a problematical issue. It should be possible to remove the restrictions that are imposed by the United Nations and by the European Union and most other nations. But the US Congress, which has imposed the most onerous constraints on Iran's oil exports and financial sector, rarely rescinds such measures. Although the US president can waive most of the sanctions for repeated six-month periods, this may not be enough to persuade Iran to agree to measures that are not similarly

limited and reversible, given that the next president could be from a different political party.³²

23. The political hurdles to a comprehensive solution may thus prove to be insurmountable for the time being. Even if a deal cannot be reached by the 20 June goal set in the Joint Plan of Action, however, or within the renewable period allowed for by the deal, it will not mean the end of diplomacy. Engagement has already proven successful in capping both Iran's program and the application of new sanctions. The prospect for war over the Iranian nuclear issue has also been shelved for the time being thanks to the pragmatic diplomacy pursued by both sides. Through a combination of more limits on its weapons capability, heightened transparency and clarity about the disincentives if Iran were to cross the line to becoming nuclear armed, it should continue to be possible to dissuade Iran from taking this fateful step.

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²⁷ "Iran vice president says row over reactor resolved," *Washington Post*, 19 April 2014.

²⁸ Einhorn, "Preventing a Nuclear-Armed Iran."

²⁹ See, for example, George Perkovich, "Crafting a Well-Rounded Nuclear Deal With Iran," *Arms Control Today*, March 2014, and Daryl Kimball, "Toward a Final-Phase Deal With Iran," *Arms Control Today*, March 2014.

³⁰ Mark Fitzpatrick, "Ways forward for Iran nuclear deal," IISS Voices blog, 7 February 2014, <http://www.iiss.org/en/regions/iran/part-two-mark-56a8>.

³¹ Joseph Cirincione, "A Formula for Success with Iran," *Defense One*, 7 April 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/04/formula-success-iran/82051/?oref=d-river>.

³² Jamal Abdil and Tyler Cullis, "NIAC Policy Memo: Barriers to Lifting U.S. Sanctions in a Final Deal with Iran," National Iranian American Council, 18 March 2014, <http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=10605>.

APLN and CNND

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