

# Iran closer to compromise on its uranium enrichment

The West preaches enrichment abstinence – not for all, of course, but for Iran

**BY ERNIE REGEHR**

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While Iran continues to reject Security Council demands that it suspend uranium enrichment, it has signaled some willingness to open its program to international controls. So far the Bush administration has shown little interest in taking "yes" for an answer.

Ritual denunciations of Iran and its uranium enrichment activity were a central theme of President George Bush's farewell tour of Europe, and of course the Iranians did not fail in offering antiphonal insistence that they have no intention of ending a peaceful program that they point out is Iran's right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The West preaches enrichment abstinence (not for all, of course, but for Iran) and warns of more sanctions as the wages of Iranian sin. The Iranians, through their irrepressible but now politically vulnerable president, offer prayers of triumph: "With God's help today [we] have gained victory and the enemies cannot do a damned thing," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is reported to have said on state television.

As political liturgy these exchanges may soothe some souls somewhere, but as diplomacy they have no chance of success. That is not to say, however, that success is unavailable.

Iran's uranium enrichment program, which is itself not in violation of any disarmament or non-proliferation rules and obligations, began in secret and was definitely illicit as long it was withheld from the monitoring and inspections oversight of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Uranium enrichment produces fuel for nuclear power reactors, but can also be adapted for building nuclear weapons – which is obviously why all enrichment must be fully monitored and verified to ensure that it remains strictly for peaceful purposes, and why clandestine programs are properly treated as a grave offence.

When Iran's clandestine enrichment program was discovered in 2003, the United Nations Security Council insisted that it be suspended until such time as the IAEA and the Security Council could both be assured that Iran was not and is not in pursuit of a nuclear weapon. And that is roughly where the matter still stands. As the most recent IAEA report on Iran makes clear, however, Tehran has come a long way in providing credible explanations of the peaceful nature of its program, and in opening all current activity to inspections, thus enabling the IAEA to declare that it "has been able to verify the non-diversion [to weapons purposes] of declared nuclear material in Iran."

But nothing is quite that simple. The IAEA also reports that some serious issues are still outstanding and that Iran could and should be a lot more co-operative. Notably, Iran should implement the Additional Protocol to the IAEA Safeguards Agreement, a provision that allows more intrusive inspections and would help the IAEA to become more confident that Iran no longer has any undeclared or clandestine nuclear materials and activities.

But there are also other outstanding questions, notably about "alleged studies" that, if confirmed, would at a minimum indicate some specific Iranian curiosity about nuclear weapon design and development. The allegations are controversial and certainly not confirmed. They come from American intelligence sources and the documents on which allegations are based have not been disclosed (only electronic versions). Iran rejects their authenticity.

All the while, the enrichment suspension order has been ignored. Indeed, Iran has made steady progress in developing its uranium enrichment capacity.

It is not hard to conclude that the current strategy is not working. But for some time now there have been signals from Tehran that a compelling compromise could be available, and reports out of Washington suggest that some U.S. lawmakers – not yet, to be sure, the ones in a position to do something about it – may actually be listening.

Iranian academics and officials, in informal discussions in Ottawa and Tehran, have declared openness to proposals to place Iran's uranium enrichment activities under the control of an international consortium. The program would obviously be under full IAEA inspections, as the Iranian program is now, and could become part of an international program to restrict the spread of proliferation sensitive elements of the nuclear fuel cycle. The basic idea is to place such activities under international control and thus to supply reactor fuel to countries with nuclear power programs (allowing them to permanently forego nuclear fuel production).

In the U.S., this idea has received thorough study by scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and by former diplomats, and has also been the subject of informal discussions with Iranians. The scientists recently reported, according to the *Boston Globe*, that they have spent more than two years researching "the technology needed to safeguard such an international

facility, including equipment that would prevent Iranian scientists from taking control of it or learning how it works."

Former U.S. ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, has held informal talks with Iranians on the idea, and Senators Dianne Feinstein (Democrat) and Chuck Hagel (Republican) have encouraged further exploration of the idea.

There will not be an Iran-only solution to the problem of Iranian uranium enrichment. It is definitely not in the interests of the international community that Iran become fully capable of uranium enrichment under a strictly national program. At the same time, Iran has staked its claim to enrichment and it is hard to see that being reversed. Hence, the best remaining option is to place it under international control.

But that will have to be done in the context of a global move toward establishing multilateral controls over all uranium enrichment efforts. For Iran, it cannot be just a matter of taking on a couple of partners that could later be jettisoned through nationalization; rather, it must mean placing its program genuinely under multilateral controls.

It is an idea that is under detailed investigation in the IAEA. Perhaps we can allow ourselves to hope that after Jan. 20, 2009, the United States will find "yes" an answer worth considering.

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