

Tehran's nuclear standoff

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Is there to be another showdown with a Middle East state over material that might be useful for weapons of mass destruction, or will cooperation prevail? The discovery earlier this year by inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, of particles of enriched uranium at a nuclear plant in Natanz, central Iran, created widespread international concern that Iran may be in breach of its obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Under enormous pressure to appear efficient in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the inspectors' report highlighted a number of inconsistencies in Iran's account of its nuclear programme. It also drew attention to the reality that Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology had progressed further than analysts had previously thought.

With the US and Britain on the verge of regime change in Iraq, ostensibly because of its breach of UN Security Council resolutions banning any acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, Iran appeared vulnerable. Europeans scrambled to find a solution which would defuse the confrontation to the benefit of all. Given the palpable failures of any sort of agreement on the future of Iraq, it was important that American unilateralism not be given any other reason to extend itself and further destabilise the region.

The result was a concerted European effort to take the lead in dealing with Iran, insisting on a suspension of uranium enrichment activities and the immediate adoption of the additional protocol to the treaty, thereby internationalising the problem and ensuring that it did not take on a momentum of its own after more than two decades of mutual distrust and antipathy between the Islamic Republic of Iran and America.

For the Iranian authorities, the European position is striking and in many quarters welcome, since it allows more moderate members of the government to persuade hardliners that the issue is not one of Iran versus the United States, and to impress on them that Iran cannot successfully oppose the international community so united. This combined front was exemplified by the fact that the UN resolution insisting on full Iranian disclosure of its programme by October 31 was co-signed by Australia, Canada and Japan, all of whom have traditionally enjoyed cordial trading partnerships with Iran. This is important because, in considering its actions, the Iranian authorities must reflect on the commercial repercussions of any diplomatic rupture. While many Iranians may look forward to better relations with the US, at present they have nothing to lose.

The situation, of course, is not so simple. As the Europeans and even some American analysts concede, Iran is not actually in breach of the treaty which, as it stands, allows for considerable development of nuclear technology, albeit for peaceful purposes. The problem, argue the Americans, is that the treaty has become an anachronism which is out of step with the pace of technological change, and as such its parameters need to be tightened.

The Iranians respond that they have no objection to further transparency — even

offering contracts to US companies as a means of ensuring this — but insist that it must be a general change and not a particular one tailor-made for Iran. They note that while the US may have last year signed the additional protocol now being impressed upon Iran, thereby 'showing its commitment to combating the potential spread of nuclear weapons,' it has decided to exempt those 'activities or locations of direct national security significance' from the spot-checks the protocol permits, effectively rendering it pointless.

The sense of double standards looms large in the Iranian perspective. It notes with considerable irritation that Israel is not subjected to inspections and that India and Pakistan have not been reprimanded for their decision to go nuclear, and views the legalistic argument that those states were not signatory to the treaty as simply emphasising the fact that Iran is being punished for deciding to sign. Surely those who have treated the international community with such contempt that they have not bothered to sign should be on the receiving end of international opprobrium. Yet even this sense of injustice does not go to the root of Iran's determination to pursue nuclear technology and, if needs be, its military uses.

The real issue is one of national pride. As Foreign Minister Dr Kamal Kharrazi pointed out during a recent visit to the UN: 'It's a matter of national pride to have this capability, this technology, especially when it's produced domestically.' He added that the decision to produce enriched uranium was to avoid dependence on supplies of nuclear fuel on Russia: 'This does not mean that producing [nuclear] weapons will be on our agenda.'

Responding to arguments that Iran's hydrocarbon resources mean there is no economic need to develop nuclear power, Iranians point out that the programme started under the Shah with the full cooperation of the west, when Tehran's reserves were considerably larger and its infrastructure in better shape.

As this historical perspective indicates, while there is an economic argument — Iran's resources are finite and alternative energy supplies need to be explored — assisted with no little irony by US sanctions which prohibit investment in Iran's oil and gas sector, it has never been the determining factor. Far more important has been the sense of vulnerability defined through the experience of the Iran-Iraq war, and a national determination to show that Iranians can achieve a level of scientific progress which nuclear technology epitomises.

The Americans have not appreciated this fundamental dimension of Tehran's policy. For many ordinary Iranians who hold no brief for the regime, the tendency for Washington politicians and commentators to condescend and lecture Iran on its 'bad behaviour' is offensive and only reinforces a sense of national indignation and obstinacy. The US approach is regarded as not anti-Islamic Republic, but anti-Iranian, especially with repeated statements that the weapons of mass destruction 'infrastructure' must be dismantled.

Given the dual use of much of the technology, and combined with a glance across the border at Iraq, this policy would seem to imply the technological neutering of any

state not considered an intimate of the US, a view reinforced by the boycott of scientific collaboration with Iranian universities. The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers recently notified its one thousand seven hundred Iranian members that it 'can no longer offer full membership privileges or support activities,' fearing that it may be in breach of US sanctions.

For many inhabitants of the Middle East, not only Iran, this would seem to mean that Israel alone is allowed to enjoy the fruits of modernity. More damning, as far as America is concerned, is the widespread view among Iranians that the whole policy is driven by Israeli security concerns, and that Washington is not motivated by any sense of solidarity with the Iranian people.

Thus, the belief that the US would gladly abandon any pretensions of support for Iranian democratisation as long as the nuclear programme is terminated. These popular assessments, which Washington does little to assuage, reinforce national convictions and play into the hands of hardliners who say that the Americans cannot be trusted, for their aim is simply to weaken Iran.

Others are acutely aware of this aspect of the problem, and while anxious to appear even more eager than Washington that Iran sign the additional protocol, they recognise Iran's insistence that the treaty was meant to be a bilateral agreement in which the international community agrees to cooperate with a signatory in return for its commitment not to pursue military options.

There is little doubt that Iran is not seeking confrontation, and every chance that a mutually acceptable solution will be found, with Iran signing the additional protocol and resisting the temptation to interpret the treaty in a manner which raises suspicion. This will be achieved not only by offering a measure of cooperation, but also by addressing.

Iran's security concerns, most of which are acutely focused on American intentions. Europeans will need to convince Iran that they can reign in US unilateralism, a position which may be enhanced by growing difficulties in Iraq — which will undoubtedly harden some positions in Iran — and the need to keep Tehran sympathetic.

Yet American attitudes are difficult to gauge, and the possibility remains that a politically wounded President George Bush may authorise a limited air strike in the run-up to next year's presidential election. This feeds the hardline paranoia in Tehran and potentially jeopardises any agreement. There is little doubt that the profoundly destabilising consequences of such a development have been well rehearsed in European capitals, hence the determination to secure an agreement and deprive the Americans of any opportunity.

In the aftermath of the Iraq war, launched, it would seem, against the available evidence, one can forgive Iranians for being sceptical about US motives and due process. Still, as one Iranian newspaper editor commented wearily: 'As we say in Persian, there are many hopes in disappointment.'

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