

nuclear issue
Iran

What's missing

By David Kay

Tehran is likely 80 percent of the way to nuclear weapons capability, and it's time to start talking about damage control

IT would be impossible and foolish to predict what lies immediately ahead for Iran. Inflation runs rampant and domestic unrest is growing, but the leadership is banding together in support of the country's nuclear programme. Threat assessment and war planning are (or should be) about best-guessing capabilities and intentions. When it comes to Iran, these calculations are difficult, but there are things we can - and must - figure out. Given what we know and what we can best-guess, it looks as if Iran is 80 percent of the way to a functioning nuclear weapon.

Every nuclear programme needs raw materials, a way to refine them and, in the final stage, weaponisation. Getting and enriching the materials is the hardest part; without this, a nuclear reaction is impossible. How does Iran's nuclear programme measure up?

The situation is a bit murky, but we know, basically, that Tehran has a handle on the fissionable material. Iran imported significant amounts of raw uranium from China in 1991. It has also attempted to produce weapons-grade material, conducting secret enrichment efforts and acquiring designs, materials and samples of gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment from the AQ Khan network. Plus, over the past 18 years, the Iranians have developed and tested state-of-the-art centrifuges and enrichment techniques. If Iran's 6,000 forthcoming new-design centrifuges were working for a year, the programme could produce about five weapons. My best guess is that they are about two to four years away from accomplishing this.

Next comes weaponisation. The fissionable material must be converted into metal and packaged. Here again, Iran has made substantial progress. What remains is to produce these elements in adequate numbers and amounts; combine them in an engineering design that ensures that they work and that fits on a missile; and gain confidence that the resulting weapons will get the job done.

All of this is public knowledge, but the answers to most of the important questions relating to intent and progress on crucial elements of weaponisation are unknown. It's the only partially understood and suspected activities of Iran that are most alarming. Signs of these activities include detection by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors of samples of highly enriched, weapons-grade uranium; more extensive plutonium separation than Iran has admitted; weapons design work; construction of a heavy-water reactor and its associated heavy-water production

facility; design work on missile re-entry vehicles that seem to be for a nuclear weapon; and reports of yet-undiscovered programmes and facilities.

If all of these activities are real, it would mean that Iran is moving faster and is closer to obtaining a nuclear-weapons capability than the hard facts suggest. Obtaining that last 20 percent of the elements needed to make a nuclear weapon would take perhaps one to two years, instead of the four to seven years needed if they were not.

While we know a lot more about Iran than we did about Iraq (before the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars), we still lack answers

Two concerns seem to be most absent from discussion of Iran's 'nuclear future', whatever it is: First, what policies would limit any advantage that Iran might gain from nuclear weapons? Second, how do we begin to craft political, economic and security arrangements that recognise their varied interests?

to the most important questions, including:

If Iran has decided or decides to acquire nuclear weapons, how long will it take to do so and how many could it produce per year?

How much foreign assistance has Iran received, and from whom did it receive it?

Does Iran have unknown clandestine nuclear facilities and, if so, how many? Doing what?

What are the real capabilities of Iran's various weapons-delivery options, particularly its missiles?

What are the command-and-control arrangements for Iran's nuclear programme? Where is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in this mix?

This dirty-laundry list is one reason efforts to provide net assessments about where the programme is have proved so contentious. The last US attempt to produce a National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, in December, led to a comedy remarkable even by Washington standards. Yet we are talking about a country with

known nuclear ambitions and a track record of violating international obligations in pursuit of that goal.

Despite the unanswered questions, we have some pretty frightening knowledge about Iran's nuclear capabilities. Less clear are its intentions.

Tehran often claims to want only to pursue a civilian nuclear programme. But it also says it wants to wipe Israel off the map. And Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with Ahmadinejad, sees nuclear "power" as a symbol of national pride. It's difficult to know what to believe.

What truly raises tensions, though, is Iran's worldview. Iranians have

The US, along with all of the states in the Middle East, has to create security policies that guarantee that acts of aggression will not be allowed to threaten any state's survival while also beginning to build the economic institutions and policies that can create a future where war seems impossible

learned to fear the power of others and to believe that they must ultimately organise their world in a way that lessens the power of the states that pose the greatest threat to them. And Iran's essential national security threat has never been Israel. It is the United States.

My humble best guess is that Iran is pushing towards a nuclear-weapons capability as rapidly as it can. But if Tehran were to believe that American - not Israeli - military action is imminent, it might slow work on the elements of its programme that it thinks the world can observe. Yet such temporising would only be tactical. Its strategic goal is to acquire nuclear weapons to counter what it views as a real US threat. Iran appears to believe that the United States is not willing to accept the validity and survival of the Iranian revolutionary state.

Of course, Iran does not exist in a vacuum. How Israel and the United States perceive the threat, based on their own historical memories and strategic

g from the Iran debate

A new approach to Iran's nukes

A new approach is needed to put in place stricter controls on Iran's nuclear programme and to respect Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities

By Charles D Ferguson

THE United States has reached an impasse in trying to stop Iran from proceeding with its nuclear programme. Iran has repeatedly ignored UN Security Council resolutions calling on it to suspend its uranium enrichment activities that could either fuel peaceful nuclear reactors or military nuclear bombs.

In recent weeks, Iran's talks with the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency have been pretences that have allowed Iran to move ahead with uranium enrichment with no additional controls on its overall nuclear programme.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has tried to ratchet up pressure on Iran with sanctions. And more recently, during the week of the Democratic presidential convention, Sen Barack Obama reiterated that he is committed to "tightening the screws diplomatically on Iran" if elected.

Even if Iran at times toys with accepting a temporary suspension of its uranium enrichment programme, it does not appear to intend to stop this potentially dangerous activity - regardless of sanctions.

Clearly, a new approach is needed to put in place stricter controls on Iran's nuclear programme and to respect Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities.

Tough talk and Iranian defiance have left the world worrying about possible itchy trigger fingers in Israel. The Israeli military could try a replay of the 1981

operation that destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor. But this time the odds are stacked against destroying an Iranian nuclear infrastructure that is scattered among more than 20 facilities and has employed thousands of technicians.

The solution? A loyalty test can

enriched uranium and spent fuel containing plutonium for a competitive price. This would ensure that Iran would not amass a large stockpile of enriched uranium and plutonium but would continually ship this nuclear fuel material to clients.

Nuclear negotiators need to understand that Iranian leaders want to maintain loyalty to the promise they made to the Iranian public to uphold Iran's right to uranium enrichment. Equally important, Iranian leaders must understand that they need to prove their loyalty to the international legal system in order to preserve the peaceful nature of nuclear programmes

reassure both sides. Nuclear negotiators need to understand that Iranian leaders want to maintain loyalty to the promise they made to the Iranian public to uphold Iran's right to uranium enrichment. Equally important, Iranian leaders must understand that they need to prove their loyalty to the international legal system in order to preserve the peaceful nature of nuclear programmes.

A potential trust-building deal would bind the US and other nuclear energy states to Iran as clients under the condition that Iran accepts more rigorous safeguards on its nuclear programme.

The clients would agree to buy Iranian

Iranian leaders would show that their intentions are truly peaceful if they accepted this deal. And by accepting it Iran would gain international recognition for its enrichment programme and could crow that they have the world's superpower as a client. It would be a win-win situation.

Currently, missing elements cast doubt on Tehran's assertion that its enrichment programme is peaceful in nature. To make nuclear fuel, an enrichment facility is not enough.

A country needs adequate supplies of natural uranium to begin the process. Also, it needs a fuel fabrication facility

as those of the Islamic Republic.

and while not all would agree with Sen John McCain's assessment that the only thing worse than a US or Israeli military attack on Iran would be Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, few in the mainstream of American politics seem ready to go on the record with a plan for "the day after" that does not involve military action.

Two concerns seem to be most absent from discussion of Iran's "nuclear future", whatever it is: First, what policies would limit any advantage, political or military, that Iran might gain from such weapons? Second, how do we begin to craft, with all the states of the region - including Israel and Iran - political, economic and security arrangements that recognise their varied interests and concerns and their often very different perspectives on what these are? In the end, we need to decide how we can perform damage control and create arrangements that take into account states' varied interests.

Figuring this out is not rocket science. But we must begin the process of discussion, consultation, planning and acting that will lay the groundwork for a future far different from either the conflicts of the past or the current path toward a regional conflagration that may well involve nuclear weapons.

The United States, along with all of the states in the Middle East, has to create security policies that guarantee that acts of aggression will not be allowed to threaten any state's survival while also beginning to build the

The United States must figure out and articulate its strategic objectives regarding Iran's nuclear programme. At present, its actions and rhetoric are often as conflicted

to the nuclear survival of Iran. The peaceful nature of nuclear programmes

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to turn the enriched uranium into fuel that can be placed inside the core of a nuclear reactor. Iran has neither of these major components. But the limited supplies of indigenous natural uranium and the pilot scale enrichment plant now in operation are enough to allow Iran to eventually make dozens of nuclear bombs.

Therefore, Iran cannot run a peaceful nuclear programme alone. In order to build commercial nuclear reactors, Iran must rely on the major reactor producers, including France, Russia, and the US - some of the same countries working to prevent Iran from making nuclear bombs. It must also rely on international suppliers of natural uranium and international fuel fabrication facilities. The overall deal would consequently bind the major powers and Iran together in a mutual client-producer relationship.

This international team-building approach would shine a spotlight on Iran's nuclear activities and at the same time give Iran an opportunity to make good on its public pronouncements of peaceful intent. Iranian leaders have often talked about "objective guarantees" that their nuclear programme will remain peaceful, but they have yet to implement such.

Real objective guarantees would include continuous international monitoring of all nuclear facilities by employing secure means of data collection and numerous on-site inspectors. To motivate Iran to accept these measures, the major powers need to convey that the client-producer relationship is a two-way street.

A meaningful commercial relationship is about more than money. It would be a big step towards bringing Iran into the international community, a place in which all countries could work together for co-operative security. COURTESY THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

economic institutions and policies that can create a future where war seems impossible. While Iran's economy suffers, engagement is more feasible.

What is hard is the actual act of stepping off the (probably sinking) ship we stand on to construct a very different vessel. This is one of those times in history when will is more important than brilliance and when determination to shape a different future is more vital than experience in rituals of the past. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST

The writer led the UN inspections after the Persian Gulf War that uncovered the Iraqi nuclear programme. He later led the CIA's Iraq Survey Group, which determined there were no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction at the time of the 2003 invasion