

Iran's nuclear progress: **the reality**

CND briefing

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History of Iran's nuclear programme

Under the Shah

The Iranian nuclear programme began in the late 1950s under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and under the auspices of the United States' Atoms for Peace programme. The Tehran Nuclear Research Centre was established in 1958 and opened in 1967. It was equipped with a US supplied 5-megawatt light water research reactor. Iran signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified it in 1970. Aware of the finite nature of oil, the Shah considered petroleum a 'noble fuel'¹, much too valuable to waste on daily energy needs. He envisaged producing 20,000 megawatts of electricity using nuclear power. To achieve this, he enlisted assistance from the United States, Germany and France.

After the 1979 Revolution

Following the revolution, Iran's economy was crippled by sanctions, relations with the West became strained, and much of the international co-operation came to a halt. France refused to supply Iran with any enriched uranium and the French company Framatome, which signed deals in 1974 to build two 950 mW reactors at Darkhovin and in 1977 to build two 900 mW reactors at Karun, also withdrew its support. Germany's Kraftwerk-Union which had signed a contract with Iran in 1975, fully withdrew from the nuclear power project at Bushehr, leaving one reactor 50% complete and the other 85% complete. Plans were drawn up in 1978 between President Carter and the Shah to supply Iran with eight nuclear power plants; however the plants never materialised. Moreover, since the 1979 hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran, US-Iran relations have been unstable with each succeeding US government remaining suspicious of, and sometimes hostile towards, Tehran.

Iran's nuclear programme received a further blow during the Iran-Iraq war (1980 -1988) when the Bushehr reactors were damaged and later closed due to multiple bombings.

No longer able to secure co-operation from the West, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran relied on Pakistan and China (and later, Russia) as significant allies in rebuilding Iran's nuclear programme. Both China and Pakistan signed agreements with Iran to train personnel and provide nuclear hardware. Iranian nuclear technicians were trained by China under a secret Nuclear Cooperation Agreement and a number of Iranian students were trained at what were Pakistan's Engineering Research Laboratories and are now the Khan Research Laboratories, founded by Abdul Qadeer Khan.² In 1995 Iran signed a contract with Russia to resume work on the partially-completed Bushehr plant and in 2002, despite strong objections from the US, Russian technicians began construction.

Timeline of significant events between 2000 and 2005

August 2002: Alireza Jafarzadeh, a leading critic of Tehran and former member of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, revealed the existence of two unknown nuclear sites; a uranium enrichment facility in Natanz and the heavy water facility in Arak. These facilities had been hidden from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the international community for 18 years.

February and May 2003: The IAEA conducted a series of inspections in Iran and confirmed that the facilities in Natanz and Arak were under construction.

June 2003: Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the IAEA stated that inspections revealed that 'Iran failed to report certain nuclear materials and activities' and urged 'co-operative actions' on the part of Iran.³ The report did not declare Iran in breach of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

October 2003: Iran began to hold negotiations with IAEA members with respect to a more stringent set of nuclear inspections.

18th December 2003: Iran signed the Additional Protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

27th July 2004: Iran broke seals placed on uranium centrifuges by the IAEA and resumed construction of the centrifuges at Natanz.

31st July 2004: Iran stated that it had resumed building nuclear centrifuges to enrich uranium, reversing a voluntary October 2003 pledge to UK, France, and Germany to suspend all uranium enrichment-related activities.

18th September 2004: The IAEA unanimously adopted a resolution calling on Iran to suspend all activities related to uranium enrichment.

21st September 2004: Iran announced that it would continue its nuclear programme, converting 37 tonnes of yellowcake uranium for processing in centrifuges.

18th October 2004: Iran stated that it was willing to negotiate with the EU-3 (Germany, France and the UK) regarding a suspension of its uranium enrichment activities, but that it would not renounce its right to enrich uranium.

24th October 2004: The European Union made a proposal to supply Iran with civilian nuclear technology if Iran terminated its uranium enrichment programme permanently. Iran rejected this proposal, reiterating that it would not renounce its right to enrichment technologies.

15th November 2004: Talks between Iran and the EU-3 resulted in a compromise. Iran agreed to temporarily suspend its active uranium enrichment programme for the duration of a second round of talks, during which attempts would be made to arrive at a permanent, mutually-beneficial solution.

15th November 2004: A confidential UN report was leaked. The report stated that all nuclear materials

within Iran had been accounted for and there was no evidence of any military nuclear programme. Nevertheless, it observed that it could not discount the possibility of such a programme because it did not have perfect knowledge.

8th and 10th August 2005: Iran resumed conversion of uranium at the Isfahan facility, under IAEA safeguards, but did not engage in enrichment of uranium.

9th August 2005: The Iranian Head of State, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa forbidding the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons.

11th August 2005: The 35-member governing board of the IAEA adopted a resolution calling upon Iran to suspend uranium conversion, and instructed ElBaradei to submit a report on Iran's nuclear programme by 3rd September 2005. The resolution was considered by many to be weak since it did not include the threat of referral to the Security Council.

5th November 2005: The Iranian government headed by new President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, approved a plan that allowed foreign investors to participate in the work at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant. The cabinet also authorised the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran to take necessary measures to attract foreign and domestic investment in the uranium enrichment process.

Present impasse – 2006

Despite immense opposition and threats of sanctions from the US and Europe, on 10th January 2006, Iran began removing IAEA seals at 'enrichment-related locations'⁴ and later announced that it had resumed its nuclear research programme. Although this act breached an agreement that Iran had with the EU, it did not contravene the NPT, which Iran signed by in 1968.

The EU and US are concerned that Iran's enrichment activities will eventually lead to the development of nuclear weapons. Iran remains adamant however that under the NPT it holds the inalienable right to conduct nuclear research and produce fuel for peaceful civilian purposes. Mohamed ElBaradei affirms that 'as a matter of law Iran has the right to do all the nuclear activities, including enriching uranium.'⁵ However, he remains sceptical of Iran's true intentions and said that, 'even after three years [of investigation] I am not yet in a position to make a judgment on the peaceful nature of the [nuclear] program.'⁶ The EU-3 and the US are also unconvinced and have successfully rallied the support of the IAEA and Security Council members in calling for Iran's full suspension of uranium enrichment activities and research and development efforts.

In light of the gravity and changing nature of the situation, CND has produced this briefing to highlight the reactions and stated intentions of the key players involved in the developments surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. In addition, it points out significant inconsistencies between the actions (or inaction) of nuclear weapon states like the US and UK and their demands on Iran.

Iran and the NPT

Iran ratified the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon State (NNWS) in 1970. As a NNWS, Iran is prohibited from acquiring nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the NPT, in Article IV, promotes the development of nuclear power programmes:-

Article IV

1. Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of this Treaty.
2. All the Parties to the Treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Parties to the Treaty in a position to do so shall also co-operate in contributing alone or together with other States or international organizations to the further development of the applications of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, especially in the territories of non-nuclear-weapon States Party to the Treaty, with due consideration for the needs of the developing areas of the world.⁷

States that withdraw from the treaty are not penalised as long as they give three months notice to the UN Security Council. North Korea remains the only state to have withdrawn from the treaty, having done so in 2003.

Under the NPT, Iran has a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, which gives the IAEA the right to inspect nuclear facilities declared by NNWS. In 2003, Iran signed an additional protocol to this Safeguards Agreement, authorising the IAEA to inspect additional locations within Iran. However, in February 2006, after a UN decision to report Iran to the Security Council, Iran banned short-notice inspections but continues to co-operate with the IAEA.

Principal actors in the Iranian nuclear crisis

Iran

Despite speculation and accusation from the West, particularly the United States, France, Germany and the UK, Iran vehemently denies any intention of developing nuclear weapons and maintains that all of its nuclear activities are solely for peaceful purposes. Furthermore, a *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in August 2005, forbids the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons.

As a gesture of goodwill, in January 2006, top government nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani announced that Iran welcomed any contribution from any country towards its peaceful nuclear activities. He reaffirmed Iran's invitation to the EU-3 to resume talks and stated that 'the best solution to the

complicated international issues is talks and if Europeans are really willing to solve Iran's nuclear problems, they should remove problems in talks.'⁸

In preparation for possible sanctions, Central Bank Governor Ebrahim Sheibani revealed in January 2006 that Iran transferred assets out of Europe,⁹ and in response to the IAEA's decision to report Iran to the Security Council in February, Iran decided to bar short notice inspections of its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency – voluntary measures it allowed in recent years in a gesture to build trust.¹⁰

Iran's main nuclear activities since January have been uranium enrichment research and development. In April 2006, President Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had completed production of the nuclear fuel cycle on a laboratory scale and produced enriched uranium with the purity needed for a nuclear power station.¹¹ Furthermore, Iran intends to move to industrial scale production and has 'voluntarily informed the [IAEA] well in advance ... that in the fourth quarter of 2006 [it] will go for the next stage of these R&D activities – 3,000 centrifuges'.¹²

As Dr. Beeman, a professor at Brown University's Middle East Studies programme points out: many Iranians welcome having a nuclear programme, both as a means of securing the country's future energy needs and, perhaps more importantly, they believe it is a move towards modernity and independence.¹³

EU-3

Germany, France and the UK have negotiated with Iran since 2003 in an attempt to persuade Tehran to limit its nuclear programme in return for increased economic and political favours. The EU proposed to support Iran's membership to the World Trade Organisation; help Iran to build light water reactors and guarantee supplies of nuclear fuel to run them. In return, Tehran would have to abandon attempts to build a 'fuel cycle' and in particular, close down its heavy water reactor in Arak, south of Tehran.¹⁴ Although Iran temporarily suspended its uranium enrichment programme in 2004, since its recent resumption of nuclear research, all talks have come to an end and the EU-3 has dismissed Iran's offer to resume discussions.

Like the US, the EU-3 has been insistent that referring Iran to the UN Security Council is the correct way to deal with the impasse. On 4th March 2006 the IAEA Board of Governors was successful in passing a resolution that required the Director General to report Iran to the UN Security Council;¹⁵ and on 29th March a Security Council statement, sponsored by France and Britain called for Iran to re-establish 'full and sustained suspension of all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development'.¹⁶

US

The United States would consider it fundamentally unacceptable for a 'rogue' state such as Iran to be allowed to get even remotely near to having its own nuclear weapons capability. This would greatly jeopardise US options in the region, and pose a threat to its closest ally – Israel.¹⁷ In 2002, the United States accused Iran of attempting to produce nuclear weapons and declared Iran part of an 'axis of

evil'.¹⁸ By 2006, the US National Security Strategy named Iran as the single greatest challenge facing the US. Convinced that Iran is attempting to develop nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian atomic programme, the United States has pressed persistently for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council.

Perhaps to demonstrate its willingness to employ international consensus, the US supported EU-3 efforts and leaned heavily on China and Russia to vote in favour of reporting Iran to the Security Council. Despite this show of multilateralism and the US President's promise to remain committed to diplomacy first¹⁹, the US has repeatedly said that it will not rule out the option of unilateral military action as it is the only real form of 'significant leverage.'²⁰

According to a February 2006 report by the Oxford Research Group, any military action against Iran would, in practice, have to involve more than a series of attacks on a small range of directly nuclear-related sites. The report goes on to say that initial attacks would likely be undertaken more or less simultaneously, in order to kill as many of the technically competent staff as possible, therefore doing the greatest damage to longer-term prospects. Such an aspect of the attack is not widely recognised outside of military planning circles but would be an essential component of the operation.²¹

Furthermore, Seymour Hersh, one of the US's best known investigative journalists, concluded in *The New Yorker* that the US is planning military action against Iran because George Bush is intent on regime change in Tehran - and not just as a contingency should diplomatic efforts fail to halt its suspected nuclear weapons programme.²²

Any US military action would almost certainly guarantee an overtly nuclear-armed Iran in decades to come and would inevitably increase the anti-American mood in the Middle East region and beyond.²³

Russia

Construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant, abandoned after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, was started again in 2002 with co-operation from the Russians. Russia has trained hundreds of Iranians to work on the Bushehr plant, but insists that the information acquired would not give the Iranians the necessary knowledge to build nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Russia insists that its cooperation with Iran is under strict IAEA supervision.

As for the current impasse, Russia reminds international leaders how international sanctions have failed in Iraq. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, 'I don't think sanctions as a means to solve a crisis have ever achieved a goal in the recent history.'²⁴ As a feasible alternative, Russia reiterated its proposal to locate the most sensitive part of the Iranian programme - uranium enrichment - on Russian soil. After a meeting in London with other foreign ministers at the end of January 2006, Russia surprisingly agreed to support a resolution that would report Iran to the Security Council. In return, as a compromise, the US, Britain and France had to accept a Russian request to postpone any action by the Council until March 2006.²⁵

China

Like Russia, China originally expressed reluctance to take the Security Council path for fear that it would lead to sanctions or military intervention. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Kong Quan, 'China still hopes that peaceful negotiation and diplomatic means are good choices for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue and serve the interests of all the parties concerned.'²⁶

With large economic assets at stake in Iran, China, like Russia, has good reason to avoid any route that might lead to sanctions. However, China eventually agreed under great pressure during the London meeting of Foreign Ministers. China later voted in favour of having Iran reported to the Security Council.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

Since 2003, Mohamed ElBaradei, Director-General of the IAEA, has sought to keep negotiations with Iran on course. In 2003, after Iran submitted a 'comprehensive' declaration of its nuclear programme, he reported that there was no evidence that Iran was attempting to build an atomic weapon. Nevertheless, after three years of negotiations and thousands of workdays of inspections, he feels unable to say unequivocally that Iran's nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes. Director-General ElBaradei and the IAEA remain the key brokers in the ongoing nuclear deadlock between the West and Iran.

At the request of the EU-3, a special meeting of the 35-member IAEA Board of Governors was held on 4th February 2006. The Board achieved the adoption of a resolution (27 for, 3 against and 5 abstentions)[‡] which required the IAEA to refer Iran to the Security Council.²⁷ Later, on 29th March the Security Council issued a statement calling on Iran to suspend 'all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development'.²⁸ ElBaradei was mandated to report back to the Council in 30 days.

Israel

In 1958 US U-2 spy planes confirmed the existence of Israel's Dimona nuclear complex, located in the Negev desert. Later in 1986, Mordechai Vanunu, a Dimona nuclear technician, leaked details of the programme to the British press. For this, he was sentenced for treason and espionage and spent 18 years imprisoned in Israel, eleven of which were in solitary confinement. It is estimated that Israel has 100-200 nuclear weapons, yet to date Israel has refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and continues to defy UN resolutions calling for a Nuclear Weapons Free Middle East.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, successive Israeli governments have regarded Iran as their greatest long-term regional threat.²⁹ Tension between the two states has undoubtedly increased since President Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be 'wiped off the map' and described the Holocaust as a 'myth'. Despite reports in January that Israel has drawn up plans for strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities with bunker busting bombs supplied by the US, Israel's army chief has asserted that they have ruled out a pre-emptive attack. Israeli officials have also said that they will not act unilaterally to stop Iran's nuclear programme.³⁰

[‡] Cuba, Syria and Venezuela voted against; Algeria, Belarus, Indonesia, Libya and South Africa abstained.

Nuclear hypocrisy

There's much ado about Iran's nuclear ambitions, however the real elephant in the room is the inconsistency in the West's efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons.³¹ While the UK, the US and France pride themselves on being the bastions of democracy, world peace and security, these states have not invested in any significant measures necessary to decrease their own stockpiles of nuclear weaponry as required under Article VI of the NPT. Therein rests a most profound paradox.

Article VI

Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.

UK

Trident, the UK's nuclear weapons system consists of four nuclear-armed submarines, one of which is on operational patrol at all times. Each Trident submarine carries up to 48 nuclear warheads, each of which can be sent to a different target. Each warhead has an explosive power of up to 100 kilotons, which is eight times the power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, killing an estimated 140,000 people.³²

A decision to replace the current nuclear weapons system is due. In its election manifesto, the Labour Party indicated that it was 'committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent'³³. Prime Minister Blair promised a clear idea of the timeline for a debate by the end of 2006, but since then, Defence Minister Des Browne has stated that, 'Decisions will be made by the end of this year, after which the government will publish a White Paper'.³⁴ In response to whether or not it would go to the House of Commons Blair said, 'I'm not committing myself to a vote... not ruling it out either.' With or without an open parliamentary debate on the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system, the British government may be intent upon further breaching the NPT.

In terms of world safety, Iran should not pursue nuclear weapons, but it is a clear double-standard for Britain to flout the NPT by making no real effort to disarm and by deciding to replace its own nuclear weapons system, while it accuses Iran merely on suspicion that it might be intending to acquire nuclear weapons.³⁵

Britain maintains almost 200 nuclear warheads at an annual running cost of approximately £1.5 billion.

France

Amidst ongoing political negotiations and increasing tensions between Iran and the West, President Jacques Chirac could not have chosen a more inappropriate time to issue an open warning to any state deemed to be a threat to the country. During a surprise speech made at France's main nuclear submarine base in Ile Longue on February 19th, 2006, President Chirac said France's 'force de frappe' (nuclear strike force) could be used against states that were 'considering' deploying weapons of mass

destruction or against a state responsible for a terrorist attack against France or its interests.³⁶ Defence Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie made it clear that while ‘a potential enemy may think that France, given its principles, might hesitate to use the entire force of its nuclear arsenal against civilian populations,’ France has ‘modified its capacity for action and from now on has the possibility to target the control centres of an eventual enemy.’³⁷

On February 9, 2006 a military source revealed that France had secretly upgraded its nuclear arsenal capacity. The source stated that there had been two major changes: the bombs could now be fired at high altitudes to create an ‘electromagnetic impulsion’ to destroy the enemy’s computer and communications systems; and the number of nuclear warheads on each missile had been reduced to increase the missiles’ range and precision.³⁸

Military experts pointed out that this was not a step towards disarmament, but a move to improve the performance of the weapons.

France, a chief sponsor of the March 2006 UN statement, calls on Iran to halt its uranium enrichment efforts, yet France maintains an estimated 300-350 nuclear weapons on which it spends over £3.5 billion per year.³⁹

United States of America

In July 2005, President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Singh released a joint agreement that laid out ways in which ties would be strengthened between their two states, in the realms of energy, defence, space and high technology with a particular emphasis on advanced nuclear technology co-operation. The US President lauded India’s ‘strong commitment to preventing WMD proliferation’ and stated that as ‘a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology, India should acquire the same benefits and advantages as other such states.’⁴⁰

Most noteworthy was the President’s promise to persuade the US Congress to adjust US laws and policies to ensure that the deal materialised. Essentially, President Bush wants the rest of the world to treat India like the five original nuclear weapon states and expects his own Congress to exempt India from, or overturn, longstanding US laws that restrict trade with countries like India that have not submitted to full nuclear facility inspections.

Since finalising the joint agreement in March 2006 President Bush, members of his administration, and even Indian officials have been feverishly trying to convince Congress to support the pact. To date, the US Congress has not ratified a deal.

Unless of course Washington is intentionally turning a blind eye (which it often does in the case of Israel), it is widely known that India’s past nuclear record is not responsible, impeccable or praiseworthy.

In 1955, Canada supplied India with the CIRUS heavy water research reactor. In lieu of IAEA safeguards (which did not exist until after the Agency was founded in 1957) Canada required only written ‘peaceful assurances’ that the reactor would be used exclusively for peaceful purposes. However, India betrayed

Canada's trust and built up weapons grade fissile material stocks for its 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests.⁴¹ In May 1974, India carried out an underground test of its first nuclear device.⁴² In 1998 it conducted several more nuclear tests which prompted widespread international condemnation and led to Pakistan responding in a like manner – with nuclear tests of its own.⁴³

It is clearly hypocritical for the US to condemn Iran for its nuclear ambitions (which Iran maintains are only for peaceful purposes) but yet reward another state that possesses nuclear weapons, outside the NPT framework. Furthermore, the fact that India has on two occasions exploded a nuclear device, misused nuclear technology in the past and has only committed to submitting 14 of its 22 nuclear sites to the scrutiny of the IAEA should not be lightly overlooked by the proponents of the deal.

The United States is the owner of around 10,350 intact warheads, 5,300 of which are considered active or operational.

Conclusion

Peaceful dialogue and negotiation between the different states are vital in resolving this issue. Crucial for the development of this, is real progress on the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, as called for by the United Nations on many occasions.

CND calls for all of the nuclear weapons states to immediately undertake tangible steps towards eliminating their nuclear arsenals, as agreed by the signatories of the NPT. Such a confidence-building measure would demonstrate to Iran that the demands of the international community are not one-sided and that all countries are dedicated to the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

The international community and the IAEA must act even-handedly. It is not enough to sound the alarm on so-called rogue states while existing nuclear states defy NPT requirements and are not taken to task.

Attack or threat of attack can only increase the likelihood of nuclear proliferation, as states that feel under threat may come to the conclusion that they have a 'deterrent' need for nuclear weapons.

It is now crucial that existing nuclear states end the double standards that they apply with regard to nuclear weapons, and move towards genuine nuclear disarmament talks in compliance with the NPT.

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