

A plan for Iran

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In November 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a new report titled *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. The report, details of which were leaked in advance, raised the following claims about Iran's development of nuclear weapons:

“The information indicates that Iran has carried out the following activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device:

- Efforts, some successful, to procure nuclear related material and dual use equipment and materials by military related individuals and entities ...
- Efforts to develop undeclared pathways for the production of nuclear material ...
- The acquisition of nuclear weapons development information and documentation from a clandestine nuclear supply network ...
- Work on the development of an indigenous design of a nuclear weapon including the testing of components...”

The report includes a twelve-page annex, ‘Possible Military Dimensions to Iran’s Nuclear Programme’. Section A of the annex, a ‘Historical Overview’, notes Iran’s commitment to end its nuclear weapons programme from 2003 onwards and its subsequent agreements to sign up to additional protocols for inspection and verification. The ‘Historical Overview’ then claims that:

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“The Agency continued to receive additional information from Member States and acquired new information as a result of its own efforts ... Between 2007 and 2010, Iran continued to conceal nuclear activities, by not informing the Agency in a timely manner of the decision to construct or to authorize the construction of a new nuclear power plant.”

The annex then proceeds to detail a number of claims already outlined in the report.

Responses to the report came thick and fast. The then Israeli Defence Secretary, Ehud Barak, told Israeli Radio that “We are probably at the last opportunity for co-ordinated, international, lethal sanctions that will force Iran to stop”. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman called for “crippling sanctions” and warned that lack of action would amount to accepting a nuclear armed Iran. Meanwhile, calls for military action grew in the US political establishment.

Anver Cohen, an expert on Israel’s nuclear weapons programme, told *The Guardian* that “I think it’s 70%-80% bluff that we are planning to attack ... Ultimately this is a fight over the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the region”. Cohen’s colleague at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Jeffrey Lewis, commented in the same article that “if you strike the Iranian programme you guarantee they are going to turn around and try to make a bomb”.

There was significant pressure both within the US and Israel for pre-emptive military assaults to ‘neutralise’ the alleged threat of an Iranian weapon. Memories of Israel’s attack on Iraq’s Osirak reactor in the early ’80s lingered in the context of a US Presidential race and domestic issues in Israel.

What prompted the change in tone of IAEA reports which, up to this point, had not made such claims? Where was all the new information and intelligence coming from? How to explain the departure in language deployed in this report as compared to similar reports in the recent past? One possible explanation rests on the fact that a change in personnel had taken place at the top of the IAEA. Mohammed ElBaradei succeeded Hans Blix as Director General of the IAEA on 1 December 1997. He was re-elected to serve another four-year term in 2001. Along with his immediate predecessor, ElBaradei disputed the reasons put forward for the invasion of Iraq, and the US subsequently opposed his re-election for a third term in office. Despite such objections, ElBaradei went on to serve a third term which ended with the election of Japanese ambassador Yukiya Amano in 2009. Whilst ElBaradei went on to play a significant role in the fight for democracy in his native Egypt, Amano’s succession was warmly

welcomed by the US.

In the avalanche of leaked intelligence and other materials disseminated by WikiLeaks, you will find a cable from the US Embassy in Vienna – which has responsibility for relations with the IAEA – detailing its Ambassador’s views of the new Director General:

“IAEA Director General-designate Yukiya Amano thanked the U.S. for having supported his candidacy and took pains to emphasize his support for U.S. strategic objectives for the Agency. Amano reminded Ambassador on several occasions that he would need to make concessions to the G-77, which correctly required him to be fair-minded and independent, but that he was solidly in the U.S. court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program.”

Amano was widely regarded as the US’s ‘choice’ and it seems that he crafted the workings and documentation produced by the IAEA to ‘US standards’.

How close the US’s ‘hybrid’ war/strategy came to sparking a full armed confrontation with Iran can be seen in events at the very end of 2011 and in to 2012. In December 2011, the US Congress passed the *National Defence Authorization Act*, section 1245 of which allows for sanctions on any foreign bank found to be processing transactions from the Iranian Central Bank. The new act also allowed for the freezing of assets owned by Iranian financial institutions. Subsection (e) of this section of the Act, under the heading ‘Multilateral Diplomacy Initiative’ spells out the aims in full:

“(e) MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY INITIATIVE.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—The President shall—

(A) carry out an initiative of multilateral diplomacy to persuade countries purchasing oil from Iran—

(i) to limit the use by Iran of revenue from purchases of oil to purchases of non-luxury consumers goods from the country purchasing the oil; and

(ii) to prohibit purchases by Iran of—

(I) military or dual-use technology, including items—

(aa) in the Annex to the Missile Technology Control Regime Guidelines;

(bb) in the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling

and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, done at Paris January 13, 1993, and entered into force April 29, 1997 (commonly known as the “Chemical Weapons Convention”);

(cc) in Part 1 or 2 of the Nuclear Suppliers Group Guidelines; or

(dd) on a control list of the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies; or

(II) any other item that could contribute to Iran’s conventional, nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons program; and

(B) conduct outreach to petroleum-producing countries to encourage those countries to increase their output of crude oil to ensure there is a sufficient supply of crude oil from countries other than Iran and to minimize any impact on the price of oil resulting from the imposition of sanctions under this section.”

Concerns about Iranian plans to develop nuclear weapons and upgrade chemical weapons capabilities are contained in this section. However, subsections A(i) and B seem most clearly to indicate a consolidation and strengthening of existing sanctions aimed at crippling the Iranian economy and punishing the Iranian people, whilst curbing Iran’s ability to deploy “conventional” defence measures. How many more signals could the US give to Iran that a military attack was imminent? In January 2012, the following month, the European Union banned member states from importing Iranian oil.

If Iran was truly intent on building a nuclear weapons capability, as the US and its allies insisted – and as the IAEA now seemed to suggest – would this not have been a point at which the country concluded that ‘nuclear deterrence’ was essential? If Iran was the regional aggressor, commanded by unpredictable fanatics, of the type conjured for public consumption by a generation of pundits, politicians, strategists and the like, would now not be the time for it to adopt a militarily aggressive stance in response to ratcheting tensions? When the US Navy aircraft carrier, the *USS John C. Stennis*, navigated the Strait of Hormuz in early January 2012, did the Iranians meet aggressive posture with an aggressive posture of their own? What in fact happened was that Iran agreed to host a meeting with the IAEA, marking the start of negotiations leading to what became the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the ‘Iran Deal’. Talks between Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council

(P5: China, France, Russia, UK and US) plus Germany (P5+1) progressed through April to July and were described as “positive” by those involved.

In September, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the United Nations General Assembly. He took the rostrum to draw a “red line” for Iran’s nuclear programme. Given the progress made during the April-July talks, the US drew down on rhetoric threatening military action. President Obama had clashed with the Israeli government over just how urgent military intervention was. Netanyahu, brandishing a ‘cartoon’ bomb, told the General Assembly that Iran was 90% of the way towards having enough weapons-grade uranium for a bomb:

“I ask you, given this record of Iranian aggression without nuclear weapons, just imagine Iranian aggression with nuclear weapons. Imagine their long range missiles tipped with nuclear warheads, their terror networks armed with atomic bombs ...

There are those who believe that a nuclear-armed Iran can be deterred like the Soviet Union. That’s a very dangerous assumption. Militant Jihadists behave very differently from secular Marxists. There were no Soviet suicide bombers. Yet Iran produces hordes of them.

Deterrence worked with the Soviets, because every time the Soviets faced a choice between their ideology and their survival, they chose their survival. But deterrence may not work with the Iranians once they get nuclear weapons ...

I speak about it now because the hour is getting late, very late. I speak about it now because the Iranian nuclear calendar doesn’t take time out for anyone or for anything. I speak about it now because when it comes to the survival of my country, it’s not only my right to speak; it’s my duty to speak. And I believe that this is the duty of every responsible leader who wants to preserve world peace.

For nearly a decade, the international community has tried to stop the Iranian nuclear program with diplomacy. That hasn’t worked. Iran uses diplomatic negotiations as a means to buy time to advance its nuclear program. For over seven years, the international community has tried sanctions with Iran. Under the leadership of President Obama, the international community has passed some of the strongest sanctions to date.

I want to thank the governments represented here that have joined in this effort. It’s had an effect. Oil exports have been curbed and the Iranian economy has been hit hard. It’s had an effect on the economy, but we must face the truth. Sanctions have not stopped Iran’s nuclear program either. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, during the last year alone, Iran has doubled the number of centrifuges in its underground nuclear facility in Qom.

At this late hour, there is only one way to peacefully prevent Iran from

getting atomic bombs. That's by placing a clear red line on Iran's nuclear weapons program."

If the Iranians had indeed progressed 90% of the way towards the enrichment level he cited, Netanyahu wasn't stopping to ask why in any serious fashion. His warning that deterrence – or the prospect of mutually assured destruction – will not work against Iran is an articulation of the well-worn claim that Iranian leaders are singularly irrational. Netanyahu did not explicitly state that Israel would launch military assaults on Iranian nuclear facilities, but the implication was clear.

The UN General Assembly coincided with campaigning for the 2012 Presidential Elections. President Obama was under considerable pressure for not yet having delivered on his promise of a deal with Iran and was subjected to sharp criticism from his Republican opponents. The Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, claimed that Obama was "being too tough with Israel and not tough enough with Iran" following the President's speech to the General Assembly and his refusal to meet with Netanyahu.

Despite the threats, ongoing sanctions and ample room for tensions to boil over into military confrontation, talks between the P5+1 and Iran continued. Obama secured a second term as President and new talks opened in February 2013, only to stall in April. The reason? Iran was preparing for its own elections. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, widely considered to be a conservative 'hardliner' – including in Iran – was replaced by Hassan Rouhani, a more 'centrist' politician. Upon his election in June 2013, Rouhani called for the resumption of nuclear talks. These talks commenced in September, and in the same month the President of the United States of America telephoned the President of Iran: the first such phone call or discussion since 1979. Rouhani's speech to the 2013 United Nations General Assembly was welcomed by the Obama Administration. The speech is worth quoting extensively:

"Our world today is replete with fear and hope; fear of war and hostile regional and global relations; fear of deadly confrontation ... fear of poverty and destructive discrimination ... Alongside these fears, however, there are new hopes; the hope of universal acceptance by the people and the elite all across the globe of 'yes to peace and no to war' ...

The recent elections in Iran represent a clear, living example of the wise choice of hope, rationality and moderation by the great people of Iran ...

The current critical period of transition in international relations is replete

with dangers, albeit with unique opportunities. Any miscalculation of one's position, and of course, of others, will bear historic damages; a mistake by one actor will have negative impact on all others. Vulnerability is now a global and indivisible phenomenon.

At this sensitive juncture in the history of global relations, the age of zero-sum games is over ...

Coercive economic and military policies and practices geared to the maintenance and preservation of old superiorities and dominations have been pursued in a conceptual mindset that negates peace, security, human dignity, and exalted human ideals ... Yet another reflection of the same cognitive model is the persistence of Cold War mentality and bi-polar division of the world into 'superior us' and 'inferior others' ...

In this context, the strategic violence, which is manifested in the efforts to deprive regional players from their natural domain of action, containment policies, regime change from outside, and the efforts towards redrawing of political borders and frontiers, is extremely dangerous and provocative.

The prevalent international political discourse depicts a civilized center surrounded by un-civilized peripheries. In this picture, the relation between the centre of world power and the peripheries is hegemonic. The discourse assigning the North the centre stage and relegating the South to the periphery has led to the establishment of a monologue at the level of international relations ...

This propagandistic discourse has assumed dangerous proportions through portrayal and inculcation of presumed imaginary threats. One such imaginary threat is the so-called 'Iranian threat' – which has been employed as an excuse to justify a long catalogue of crimes and catastrophic practices over the past three decades ... Let me say this in all sincerity before this august world assembly, that based on irrefutable evidence, those who harp on the so-called threat of Iran are either a threat against international peace and security themselves or promote such a threat.”

Rouhani then moves on to directly address the question of Iran's nuclear programme:

“Iran and other actors should pursue two common objectives as two mutually inseparable parts of a political solution for the nuclear dossier of Iran.

1 – Iran's nuclear program – and for that matter, that of all other countries – must pursue exclusively peaceful purposes. I declare here, openly and unambiguously, that, notwithstanding the positions of others, this had been, and will always be, the objective of the Islamic Republic

of Iran. Nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran's security and defence doctrine, and contradict our fundamental religious and ethical convictions. Our national interests make it imperative that we remove any and all reasonable concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

2 – The second objective, that is, acceptance of and respect for the implementation of the right to enrichment inside Iran and enjoyment of other related nuclear rights, provides the only path towards achieving the first objective. Nuclear knowledge in Iran has been domesticated now and the nuclear technology, inclusive of enrichment, has already reached industrial scale. It is, therefore, an illusion, and extremely unrealistic, to presume that the peaceful nature of the nuclear program of Iran could be ensured through impeding the program via illegitimate pressures.

In this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran, insisting on the implementation of its rights and the imperative of international respect and cooperation in this exercise, is prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and result-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency.”

Rouhani's words speak for themselves and, in the context of more than two decades of tension – not to mention the recent ratcheting of sanctions and threats – struck a remarkably defiant tone. Why, at this point, did Iran finally agree to negotiations? Had the threats and sanctions – allegedly targeted against Iranian elites – worked? A surface reading of events certainly points in that direction. But if Iran had actually been working towards nuclear weapons and was ‘90% of the way’ to creating them, why not stall until the job was done? Was the threat of pre-emptive strikes from Israel or elsewhere the deciding factor? Perhaps, but any limited attack on Iran would have merely delayed rather than eliminated the enrichment programme.

Could it be the case that Iran agreed to nuclear negotiations for the simple reasons that it had no nuclear weapons programme and that its approach to foreign affairs is relatively rational?

Postscript: IAEA Director General Amano died on 22 July 2019.