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IRAN'S NUCLEAR DEAL: A STEP FORWARD

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On Monday 17th May 2010 the leaders of Iran, Turkey and Brazil in ceremonies held in Tehran announced a major breakthrough in Iran's nuclear dispute with the West. In a joint declaration, they reported that Iran had agreed to send 1240 kg of her low-enriched uranium (up to 3.5 percent density) to Turkey for safe keeping under IAEA supervision as part of a swap for nuclear fuel for a research reactor in Tehran.

Last October, Iran had reached a similar deal with the West to send a similar amount of her enriched uranium to Russia to be further enriched to 20 percent and then to be sent to France to be turned into fuel rods for the use in the nuclear research reactor which is used for the production of medical isotopes. According to the IAEA, at that time Iran had a stock of 1,700 kg of enriched uranium. At the moment, Iran is believed to have 2,200 kg of enriched uranium. Consequently, by sending 1240 kg to Turkey, Iran is disposing of more than half of her total stock of enriched uranium.

In October, the deal was hailed as a major breakthrough. Many Western officials claimed that by taking the biggest part of Iran's stock out of the country, she would be unable to manufacture even a single bomb, as it is believed that she needs at least 1,000 kg of enriched uranium (that should be further enriched to 90 percent) to manufacture a single bomb. This is despite Tehran's strenuous insistence that her aim is to enrich uranium for energy and not for military purposes, but Israel and the West accuse Iran of having other motives in mind.

In fact, the speed with which in October Ahmadinejad accepted to send the biggest part of Iran's enriched uranium abroad seems to indicate that Iran does not have a hidden agenda. The plan failed mainly due to point scoring among Iran's divided leadership. Even the leaders of the Green Movement said that if Ahmadinejad went ahead with the plan he would have wasted the achievements of many Iranian scientists who had succeeded in enriching uranium despite foreign sanctions and constant threats.

Some in Iran pointed out that it would not be wise to trust the word of Russia and France that had repeatedly cheated Iran on nuclear issues. Russia had delayed endlessly the completion of the nuclear power plant at Bushehr that was due to be completed in 1998, and France had refused to grant Iran rights to the Eurodif enrichment facility, partially owned by Iran since the days of the shah. The critics argued that Western countries would take Iran's enriched uranium out of the country

but they would use Security Council resolutions as an excuse not to return higher enriched uranium and fuel rods to Iran.

It was in view of such opposition and such misgivings that the Iranian government decided to demand that the swap should take place on Iranian territory or on an Iranian island in the Persian Gulf. They stated that they would put a tonne of Iran's enriched uranium under the supervision of the IAEA and when they received the fuel rods the IAEA could transfer the stored uranium to the country that had provided the fuel. Another Iranian proposal was that instead of sending the bulk of her enriched uranium abroad it could be done in batches. As she received fuel rods in return for one batch of its enriched uranium, she would send another batch abroad.

However, the United States and other Western countries dismissed those Iranian counter-proposals out of hand, saying that they did not meet their initial demands that the greater part of Iranian enriched uranium should be taken out of Iranian territory immediately.

Now, by agreeing to carry out the swap on Turkish soil the Western demand that Iran should give up the larger part of her enriched uranium would be satisfied and Iran's fear of Western bad faith and not returning the fuel rods to Iran would also be allayed.

One would have expected the West, and particularly the United States, to take Iran's agreement to their proposal as a positive sign and to push to resolve the dispute by peaceful means. If the West was not fully satisfied with the deal, it could have regarded the deal as a positive first step, but ask for further clarification or for the transfer of a larger quantity of Iran's enriched uranium to Turkey.

However, with indecent haste, a day after that important agreement, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced that a new package of sanctions against Iran had been approved by the major powers and would be sent to the UN Security Council later in the day.

The text of the draft agreement calls for many new sanctions on Iran's banking, military imports and exports, missile technology, inspection of Iranian ships and many things besides.¹ She added: "I think this announcement is as convincing an answer to the efforts undertaken in Tehran over the last few days as any we could provide."²

By acting in such a belligerent manner, the United States gives the impression to many Iranians and many other people throughout the world that she is more interested in using Iran's nuclear programme as an excuse to put more pressure on Iran, rather than resolving the situation through peaceful means.

That summary dismissal of the agreement also insults two of America's most important allies in Latin America and the Middle East, where America claims to have special national interests. In fact, with their bold initiative, Turkey and Brazil, two important members of what we contemptuously used to call the Third World, have shown that it is possible for medium-sized countries to get engaged in international

¹ See: http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/UNSCR_Iran_18_May_2010_to_UNSC.pdf

² See Gary Sick, "Giving the finger to Iran (and Turkey and...)", Gary's Choice, May 18, 2010, <http://garysick.tumblr.com/>

conflicts and resolve them without the involvement or permission of the sole remaining super-power.

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At present, the world is going through very difficult times. The global economic recession, the ongoing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, and the scourge of international terrorism have produced a situation more dangerous than at any time since the Second World War. The Arab-Israeli conflict continues with no resolution in sight, and the latest criminal attack on a humanitarian aid convoy in international waters by Israel has further aggravated the situation and alienated Israel's only friend in the Middle East.

Under the present situation, it would seem logical to do anything that would reduce tension in the Middle East by finding a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear programme.

As someone who was born in Iran but who has spent most of his life abroad, I believe that we must strive to achieve two goals.

The *first* one is to make sure that Iran will not acquire nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran would be detrimental to the cause of non-proliferation, and it would not in fact increase Iran's security either. On the contrary, it would give rise to greater Western and Israeli nervousness and hostility. President Barrack Obama's "Nuclear Posture Review" released at the beginning of April 2010, which made just about every non-nuclear state immune from any threat of nuclear retaliation by the United States, singled out Iran and North Korea as the two countries that might be targeted with nuclear weapons.³

That policy is particularly outrageous in the case of Iran that is a member of the NPT. It would discourage other countries from joining the NPT if they could still be subjected to nuclear blackmail. During the Cold War nuclear weapons were regarded as a form of deterrence, on the basis of the MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) concept. To envisage the use of such weapons after the end of the Cold War is irresponsible and reprehensible and makes a mockery of the claim that the United States would like to move towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, at a time when the whole world is moving towards the reduction of nuclear weapons it would be folly for Iran to try to buck the trend and move towards such weapons.

The *second* goal must be to achieve Iran's continued compliance with the NPT through peaceful means. Although US officials still repeat the mantra that all options are on the table, and although some are even actively encouraging an attack on Iran's enrichment facilities, they seem to ignore the fact that no military action would be limited to a simple strike on a few targets. Any attack on Iran's facilities would lead to Iranian retaliation that would not be limited against the country that launches such an attack and could engulf the entire Middle East in conflict.

³ See: "Obama's Nuclear Strategy Intended as a Message", by David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, New York Times, April 6, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/07/world/07arms.html?th&emc=th>

We do not seem to learn from our mistakes. Despite the initial successes in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars are still continuing in those countries many years after the initial invasion, with thousands of Western soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans having perished as the result of those illegal wars. Iran, with a population of more than 70 million and with much greater military and strategic capabilities than either Iraq or Afghanistan would put up a stiff resistance. Although such a war would devastate Iran, no country in the region – including Israel – would remain immune from the ensuing conflagration. The outcome would be even worse if Israel were to carry out such an attack, as it often threatens.

A short while ago, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned that the region would witness “comprehensive catastrophe” in the event of Israel carrying out a military strike on Iran. In a statement posted on the Russian presidential website, Medvedev said that an Israeli attack on Iran would lead to an unprecedented deterioration of regional conditions and a full-scale disaster.⁴ He added that such an eventuality would also result in uncalculated actions such as the employment of nuclear arms, resulting in the death of thousands of people and making millions of others homeless.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the situation dispassionately and separate facts from fiction.

Prior to the Iraq War, there was a great deal of propaganda about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction. In a series of articles in the New York Times, Michael Gordon and Judith Miller repeatedly wrote, without any trace of doubt or equivocation, about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. In one such article that was published on 8 September 2002 they authoritatively stated: "More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass destruction, Iraq has stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said today." In the same article they claimed that Saddam was trying to purchase aluminum tubes to be used in Iraq's uranium enrichment program.⁵ Since then, Ms Miller and others like her have been totally discredited and her lies have been exposed.⁶

Such propaganda was not limited to some journalists with a prior agenda, but they found their way into presidential speeches as well. For example, in a speech in Cincinnati on 7 October 2002, former President George W. Bush said:

"The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program ... Iraq has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and other equipment needed for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons."

As far as Iran is concerned, similar allegations have been made for nearly 30 years. As early as June 1984, Minority Whip of the United States Senate Alan Cranston asserted that the Islamic Republic of Iran was seven years away from being able to build its own nuclear weapon.⁷ In 1992 the present Israeli President Shimon Peres

⁴ See NAM News Network, April 13th, 2010, <http://news.brunei.fm/2010/04/13/egypt-rejects-any-military-action-against-iran/>

⁵ See "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts" By Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller, New York Times, September 8, 2002

⁶ See, for example, A. Cockburn, "Judy Miller's war", www.counterpunch.org/cockburn08182003.html or Professor Juan Cole, "Judy Miller and the neocons", salon.com. The article can be retrieved from fairuse.1accesshost.com/news2/salon62.html

⁷ See "Senator says Iran, Iraq seek N-Bomb", June 27, 1984, The Age, p. 7

predicted that Iran would have a nuclear bomb by 1999. The present Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak said in 1996 that Iran would be producing nuclear weapons by 2004.⁸

These are just a few examples out of many. Of course, the fact that they have been falsely crying wolf in the past does not mean that one has to dismiss their claim this time too. However, there are certain known facts, which indicate that this time too these fears are exaggerated.

On the one hand, the IAEA has repeatedly stated that it has not seen any sign of diversion from a peaceful program. The NIE report in December 2007 said with "moderate-to-high confidence" that Iran currently did not have a nuclear weapon program. It stated that Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The document estimated that the very earliest Iran could produce enough highly-enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon even if she intended to go down that route would be late 2009, but some time between 2010 and 2015 is more likely.⁹

On 17 April 2010 New York Times reported a Senate hearing in which two leading US generals associated with defence intelligence also said that Iran was some way away from the ability to manufacture nuclear weapons:

At the same hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Lt. Gen. Ronald L. Burgess Jr., director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and one of the military's most experienced officers on nuclear matters, said that Iran could produce bomb-grade fuel for at least one nuclear weapon within a year, but that it would probably need two to five years to manufacture a workable atomic bomb. Lt. Gen. Ronald L. Burgess Jr. saying that "Iran could produce bomb-grade fuel for at least one nuclear weapon within a year, but that it would probably need two to five years to manufacture a workable atomic bomb."¹⁰

When at the beginning of February 2010 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told the world that if the West refused to provide Iran fuel for Iran's U.S.-built research reactor, Iran would be able to enrich uranium to 20 per cent herself, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs scoffed: "He [Ahmadinezhad] says many things, and many of them turn out to be untrue. We do not believe they have the capability to enrich to the degree to which they now say they are enriching."¹¹ So what is it? Is Iran not even capable of enriching uranium to 20 per cent, or is she on the verge of producing highly enriched uranium (more than 90 per cent density) required for a nuclear bomb?

The opening session of the United Nations conference to strengthen the NPT that started on 3 May 2010 was dominated by Iran's president denouncing the West, but also again stressing that Iran was not interested in nuclear weapons. Uranium enrichment is legal under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), but of course steps must be taken to ensure that Iran's exercise of her legal right to enrich uranium

⁸ See Roger Cohen, "Israel Cries Wolf" <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/09/opinion/09iht-edcohen.html?th&emc=th>

⁹ See "Iran report frustrates US hawks", BBC News, 3 December 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7126117.stm>

¹⁰ See "Gates Says U.S. Lacks a Policy to Thwart Iran" by David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, New York Times, April 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/world/middleeast/18iran.html>

¹¹ See "Is Iran Running a Bluff?" by Patrick J. Buchanan, February 16, 2010, antiwar.com, <http://original.antiwar.com/buchanan/2010/02/15/is-iran-running-a-bluff/>

does not lead to the manufacturing of weapons. The fact that Iran tries to place her enrichment facilities under hardened shelters is no indication of any attempt to manufacture weapons. The United States has frequently hinted at the possibility of destroying Iran's enrichment facilities. Israel has also threatened the same and has shown that she is capable of carrying out that task with the help of U.S.-supplied aircraft and weapons. She carried out such an attack on Iraq's Osiraq plant. Israel also destroyed an alleged nuclear reactor that was being built in Syria with the help of North Korea.

In the face of these realities, it is not only understandable that the new enrichment facilities are placed in hardened underground sites, it would be stupid to have it any other way. After the latest publicity about Iran's new enrichment plant in Fardo near Qom, the IAEA inspectors that inspected it said that it was merely a big hole in the mountain and nothing to worry about.

But, let us say that the alarmists are right, and that Iran successfully enriches uranium to weapons grade. Only a couple of such devices have been exploded, and the current stockpiles of modern weapons use plutonium. Deliverable weapons are plutonium bombs, which are light enough for missile delivery, either singly or in multiples. There is nothing in the Iranian program to indicate that they are moving toward plutonium production for practical weapons. Enriching uranium to the density required for nuclear weapons cannot be done in secret and the IAEA is bound to discover it. Furthermore, in order to manufacture the bomb Iran would need to test such a weapon as has been done by any country that has succeeded in manufacturing nuclear weapons. She has to leave the NPT before being able to go down that road. So, there would be many signs that would alert the world to such a policy.

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In view of Iran's latest agreement, the time has come to take yes for an answer and move to normalise relations with that important country in the Middle East. Normalisation of relations with Iran would contribute positively to many ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and ensure greater security in the vital Persian Gulf region.

In this connection, there are a number of points to be borne in mind:

1- Extremist forces both in Iran and the West are averse to reaching an accommodation between the two and some are actively inciting a confrontation. By rewarding the moderates on both sides the extremists would be sidelined and hopes for accommodation would increase.

2- Iran's concession, which has already been strongly attacked by some extremists inside Iran, has provided an opportunity for starting a dialogue and may be amending and strengthening the agreement. Iran has made a concession and demands some concessions in return. Giving a positive response to this concession would encourage further positive steps in the future.

3- One has to support positive steps by either side, regardless of who has initiated such moves. Although the West is strongly opposed to Ahmadinejad's often provocative and unacceptable verbal pronouncements, one good act deserves a good response. Rejecting this offer out of hand would only show the futility of making any further compromises and would push Iranian leaders towards greater radicalism.

4- This move is not the end of the conflict, but is the first step in a long process. This could act as a way of building mutual trust and pushing Iran to make concessions on other regional policies apart from the nuclear issue, such as her support for Hamas and Hizbullah, her approach to the Arab-Israeli peace talks, her policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, etc. Iran should regard this concession as the first step in a more constructive approach towards the West and a new policy of positive interaction in the world. If it is used only as a tactical move to delay sanctions it could backfire and make the situation worse. However, if it is the start of a new strategic evaluation of Iran' relations with the region and the world it can produce many positive results for Iran and the world.

5- If an agreement is reached over the nuclear issue it would calm the domestic situation in Iran and would strengthen the reformers. The nuclear file and the Western-imposed sanctions have cast a heavy shadow over everything else in Iran and have produced a tense and polarised situation. So long as the Iranian government can use the nuclear issue as a national cause that is opposed by the West, the reformers are forced to silence. The removal of the threat of force or sanctions on Iran would free the reformers to launch an even more determined campaign against the ruling establishment than the one they did a year ago at the last presidential election, and more ordinary people would support them without the fear of undermining national integrity.

6- If this opportunity is missed, the West would be seen by many people in the Non-aligned movement and in the rest of the world as having a hidden agenda against Muslim countries. That would further strengthen anti-Western feelings in the Middle East and would probably give rise to a united stance against Western interests in the region.

The confrontational, aggressive approach has failed to change Iran's nuclear strategy, while the Turkish-Brazilian approach based on respect and dialogue has been more successful. The coming days and weeks will show whether the US-Israel-led alliance will continue its belligerent attitude or turn towards diplomacy and negotiations to resolve the differences. Turkey and Iran are two Middle Eastern powers that are at once strong, technically proficient, and proud of their sovereignty. Trying to ignore or isolate them would have incalculable results for the future of the Middle East.

Footnotes:

¹ See: http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/UNSCR_Iran_18_May_2010_to_UNSC.pdf

² See Gary Sick, "Giving the finger to Iran (and Turkey and...)", Gary's Choice, May 18, 2010, <http://garysick.tumblr.com/>

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⁴ See NAM News Network, April 13th, 2010, <http://news.brunei.fm/2010/04/13/egypt-rejects-any-military-action-against-iran/>

⁵ See "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts" By Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller, New York Times, September 8, 2002

⁶ See, for example, A. Cockburn, "Judy Miller's war", www.counterpunch.org/cockburn08182003.html or Professor Juan Cole, "Judy Miller and the neocons", salon.com. The article can be retrieved from fairuse.1accesshost.com/news2/salon62.html.

⁷ See "Senator says Iran, Iraq seek N-Bomb", June 27, 1984, *The Age*, p. 7

⁸ See Roger Cohen, "Israel Cries Wolf" <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/09/opinion/09iht-edcohen.html?th&emc=th>

⁹ See "Iran report frustrates US hawks", BBC News, 3 December 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7126117.stm>

¹⁰ See "Gates Says U.S. Lacks a Policy to Thwart Iran" by David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, *New York Times*, April 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/world/middleeast/18iran.html>

¹¹ See "Is Iran Running a Bluff?" by Patrick J. Buchanan, February 16, 2010, [antiwar.com](http://original.antiwar.com/buchanan/2010/02/15/is-iran-running-a-bluff/), <http://original.antiwar.com/buchanan/2010/02/15/is-iran-running-a-bluff/>

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