

Iran's Nuclear Program - Then and Now: Documents from 1970s Presage Issues Surrounding Deal with P5+1

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President Gerald R. Ford and the Shah of Iran confer over a map during the Shah's May 1975 visit to Washington, D.C. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sits in the background. (Photo courtesy of Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library)

Washington, D.C. — Four decades ago — in the mid-1970s — U.S. and Iranian officials haggled over a range of concerns that uncannily prefigured similar clashes that surfaced prior to today's history-making nuclear accord between the P5+1 governments and Iran, according to documents posted today by the National Security Archive at www.nsarchive.org.

The documents from the 1970s record the Shah of Iran's insistence that his country had "rights" under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to develop such a program. The Shah further claimed his interest was only in peaceful activities, and cited among other justifications the need to be able to compensate for the eventual decline in Iran's oil reserves. The current Iranian government, whose predecessors overthrew the Shah in 1979, has propounded the same arguments.

For their part, Obama administration officials have expressed concerns — echoed far more sharply by opponents of a deal — about the threat of proliferation inherent in any agreement that allows Iran to develop nuclear energy resources. Doubts have also sprung up from many quarters in recent years that Tehran's aims are purely peaceful, and skepticism is even more rife about the Islamic Republic's claim that it needs to address the fact that its oil resources are finite. As during the Ford and Carter years, worries about nuclear weapons being available for supporting terrorism have hampered the current talks.

Of course there are differences between "then and now." For instance, in the 1970s the U.S. and many other countries objected to Iran having any capability to produce either plutonium or highly enriched uranium whereas in the current era Iran's abilities in the latter regard are an established fact. The political picture is also vastly different. The U.S. and Iranian governments have been bitter enemies since 1979, in contrast to the close ties that existed between Washington and the Shah.

Despite the basic differences between the two sides, and the degree of mistrust that has characterized their relations, Iran and its negotiating partners managed to reach fundamental nuclear accords in the 1970s — under both a Republican and a Democratic U.S. president, respectively — as well as now in 2015. In the earlier case, the 1979 revolution intervened before the agreement could be signed. Today's accord still requires

congressional approval, among other steps, before it enters into force. But the parallels after so many years and despite the disparity in political outlook inside Iran, then and now, are intriguing.

Today's posting draws heavily on previous National Security Archive [electronic publications](#) compiled and edited by William Burr whose archival research and Freedom of Information Act / Mandatory Declassification Review requests over the years have steadily broken new ground on this critical subject. The descriptions for the 1970s documents below are edited versions of material produced by Dr. Burr.

For purposes of comparison and permanent access, this posting also includes the text of the July 14, 2015, Iran – P5+1 agreement and official remarks by President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz.

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DOCUMENTS

[Document 1](#): U.S. Embassy Paris cable 15445 to Department of State, "Further Remarks by Shah on Nuclear Weapons," 25 June 1974, Unclassified

[Document 2](#): U.S. Embassy Tehran cable 5192 to Department of State, "Shah's Alleged Statement on Nuclear Weapons," 25 June 1974, Confidential

Sources: Mandatory review (MR) request to Department of Defense and Access to Archival Documentation (AAD), National Archives and Records Administration

Not long after the Indian "peaceful nuclear explosion," the Shah of Iran caused a flap when asked by a journalist whether Iran would have nuclear weapons: "without any doubt, and sooner than one would think." Iranian officials quickly denied that the Shah had said any such thing; instead, they claimed his point was that Iran was "not thinking of building atomic weapons but m[a]y revise its policy ... if other non-nuclear nations do."

[Document 3](#): Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs to Secretary of Defense, "Nuclear Energy Cooperation with Iran (U) – Action Memorandum," n.d. [Late June 1974], enclosing Atomic Energy Commission and Department of State memoranda, Confidential, with handwritten note attached

Source: Mandatory Declassification Review request

These memoranda provide a sense of the concerns that shaped the U.S. position throughout the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Not only did Defense Department officials observe that the nuclear power plants sought by the Shah would provide a capability to produce hundreds of nuclear weapons, Department of State officials worried that should the Shah's dictatorship collapse and Iran became unstable, "domestic dissidents or foreign terrorists might easily be able to seize any special nuclear material stored in Iran for use in bombs." Moreover, "an aggressive successor to the Shah might consider nuclear weapons the final item needed to establish Iran's complete military dominance of the region." It was those concerns that made the Ford administration seek special controls to ensure that U.S.-

supplied nuclear materials in Iran were safeguarded for peaceful uses only.

[Document 4](#): NSC Under Secretaries Committee to Deputy Secretary of Defense et al, "US Nuclear Non-Proliferation Policy," 4 December 1974, enclosing Memorandum for the President from Robert S. Ingersoll, Chairman, 4 December 1974, and NSSM 202 Study, "Executive Summary," Secret

Source: National Archives, CIA Research Tool (CREST)

Other Ford administration priorities, including an ongoing interagency nuclear proliferation policy review, temporarily put the pending Iranian nuclear deal on the backburner. The policy review reproduced here, completed in early December 1974, recommended an "intensified program to inhibit the further spread of independent nuclear explosives capabilities." Worried that inhibitions to nuclear proliferation and security guarantees were weakening, the NSC Under Secretaries recognized that it might be possible only to delay proliferation, but that even a "partially effective strategy" could serve U.S. national security policy. Any action taken, however, had to be cooperative because the United States was beginning to lose its dominant position as a nuclear exporter.

[Document 5](#): National Security Decision Memorandum 292, "U.S.-Iran Nuclear Cooperation," 22 April 1975, signed by Henry Kissinger, Secret

Source: Digital National Security Archive, Presidential Directives on National Security, Part II: From Harry Truman to George W. Bush, Jeffrey Richelson, editor.

While Henry Kissinger already had signed off on a policy position, the Iranian deal had to go through a major review so that it would have the support of all relevant agencies. During early Spring 1975, before the Shah's scheduled visit to the United States in May, the agencies considered possible approaches to the reactor sale, trying to secure an optimal balance between proliferation "principles and objectives" and such goals as export business and good relations with the Shah. After reviewing a number of options, ranging from a veto over reprocessing to allowing Iran to "perform reprocessing" with adequate safeguards, the White House issued this National Security Decision Memorandum. While Kissinger took a flexible position on fuel supply issues, the initial negotiating position on reprocessing would be hard: "Continue to require U.S. approval for reprocessing of U.S. supplied fuel," with the establishment of a multinational reprocessing facility an "important factor" for securing such approval. For a fallback position, the U.S. would approve reprocessing in Iran so long as the supplier of technology and equipment was a "full and active participation in the plant," with the possibility of U.S. participation to be held "open." As long as the U.S. was able to ensure additional safeguards, the possibility of a binational option was generally consistent with Richard Helms' advice that Washington work for a tacit veto by acquiring "a voice in management decisions" in a reprocessing plant.

[Document 6](#): Tehran Embassy cable 11539 to State Department, "US/Iran Nuclear Agreement," 26 November 1975, Secret

Source: Mandatory Declassification Review request

Discussions at Vienna in 1975 — also the site of the 2015 talks — disclosed serious disagreements over the nuclear cooperation agreement, with Iran's atomic energy chief rejecting Washington's insistence that, through a multinational plant, the U.S. participate in

decisions on reprocessing of U.S.-supplied spent fuel. Kissinger was not ready to back down from this position; a telegram that he approved asked Ambassador to Iran Richard Helms to explain U.S. motives to the Shah and to make the point that the Ford administration was not singling out Iran in any way but merely focused on protecting regional security and stability. But in this cable, Helms worries “how serious a problem the nuclear deadlock has become,” especially after the Shah observed, in an interview, that the U.S. position conflicted with Iran’s “sovereignty” and that Washington was asking for things “that the French or Germans would never dream of doing.”

[Document 7](#): Memorandum of conversation, “Secretary’s Meeting with the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament,” 6 January [1977], Secret

Source: Digital National Security Archive

As secretary of state, Kissinger held periodic meetings with the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament (GAC), which was the statutorily-mandated advisory body to the late, lamented Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). During this particular meeting, which included reviews of SALT policy and developments in China, the discussion turned to the problem of nuclear proliferation. Worried about loose command-and-control arrangements in new nuclear states and the possibility that nuclear use in an India-Pakistan conflict could “increase temptations for their use elsewhere,” Kissinger asserted that “we should move heaven and earth” to curb proliferation. Adding a comment that would resonate in today’s debate over the Iran deal, Kissinger remarked: “Even if we can buy only a decade [it is] worth it to prevent it.”

[Document 8](#): U.S. Embassy Tehran cable 5397 to State Department, “Audience with Shah,” 20 June 1977, Confidential

Source: Mandatory Declassification Review request

In June 1977, a new ambassador, career foreign service officer William Sullivan, arrived in Tehran, presenting his credentials to the Shah on 18 June. During their meeting, the Shah told Sullivan that he was ready to resume the nuclear power negotiations and expressed hope that the reactors would be sold. As Sullivan explained in his cable, he did not follow up on the Shah’s observations because he wanted the Iranians to “put all their cards on the table” before using the guidance that President Carter had given him. Sullivan did not want to “look too eager” (a charge leveled against the Obama administration by some critics in 2015). The Shah’s “specific disavowal of interest in reprocessing plant” met with a skeptical response from the cartoonist at ISA’s Iran desk who drew a small picture of a bull next to those words.

[Document 9](#): State Department cable 125971 to Embassy Tehran, “U.S.-Iran Nuclear Cooperation Agreement,” 17 May 1978, Confidential

Source: Mandatory Declassification Review request

While State Department officials had hoped that early Congressional action on White House nonproliferation objectives would expedite the agreement with Iran, Carter did not sign the Nonproliferation Act until March 1978. The month before, U.S. and Iranian officials had completed the negotiations, perhaps expedited by a brief conversation that President Carter had had with the Shah during his visit to Iran in late December 1977. (This was the visit

where Carter had famously referred to Iran as an “island of stability.”)

In May 1978, the State Department sent a draft agreement to Tehran — notable partly for its brevity (26 pages) compared to the 2015 agreement (159 pages). Like a similar agreement in 1976 under President Ford, the objective was to avoid proliferation risks, but the Carter administration took a slightly different approach to reprocessing. In article 6, Iran would not reprocess spent fuel or enrich uranium supplied by the U.S. “unless the parties agree.” This was not terribly different from the Ford administration’s language that reprocessing must be “performed in facilities acceptable to the parties.” The United States retained a veto. The key differences were in the separate note, which was more detailed than the 1976 version. Besides including language on physical security, expeditious NRC action on licenses, and international fuel cycle studies, the note provided alternative arrangements for spent fuel resulting from U.S.-supplied material: 1) storage in Iran, 2) storage in the U.S., or 3) storage, processing, or other disposition ... in accordance with internationally accepted arrangements.”

[Document 10](#): “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” [Agreement between Iran and P5+1 countries], July 14, 2015, Unclassified

Source: Russian Foreign Ministry Web Site

This is the full text of the 159-page joint agreement of July 14, 2015, as posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry’s web site (from which most media appear to have retrieved the document).

[Document 11](#): State Department, “Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Nuclear Program,” April 2, 2015, Unclassified

Source: State Department

This document breaks down the main issues under consideration by negotiators in Vienna during Spring and Summer 2015. Its aim was to summarize the process but it also unwittingly serves as a point of comparison with the July 14 document. The summary notes pointedly that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”

[Document 12](#): White House, “Statement by the President on Iran,” July 14, 2015, Unclassified

Source: White House

Released at 7:02 a.m., this statement by President Obama reflects both a sense of accomplishment and determination not to see two years of effort undone by opponents of the accord. “I am confident that this deal will meet the national security interest of the United States and our allies. So I will veto any legislation that prevents the successful implementation of this deal.”

[Document 13](#): State Department, “Press Availability on Nuclear Deal with Iran,” July 14, 2015, Unclassified

Source: State Department

Secretary of State Kerry addressed these remarks to the media in Vienna. Calling July 14 “an

historic day," he describes the agreement as "a step away from the specter of conflict and towards the possibility of peace."

[Document 14](#): Energy Department, "Statement from Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," July 14, 2015, Unclassified

Source: Energy Department

Energy Secretary Moniz became a key member of the U.S. negotiating team in Vienna. A theoretical physicist by training, he served as both an expert and a political shield against those inclined to criticize the talks for lacking seriousness.

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