

Under siege, Iran ups the ante

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Global Research, April 10, 2007

The Hindu 10 April 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Ordinarily Iran's announcement hailing its mastery over "industrial scale" nuclear fuel enrichment should have occasioned neither surprise nor alarm. After all, the Iranian plan to run up to 3,000 centrifuges before eventually installing 50,000 more was well known. And the multiple cascades of centrifuges at Natanz into which Iranian scientists are said to have injected UF₆ gas are all operating under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA continues to have access to the Natanz facility under its bilateral safeguards agreement with Iran. Its inspectors will be able to verify the number of centrifuges into which UF₆ feedstock was introduced, tabulate a material balance to ensure no safeguarded material has gone astray, and confirm that uranium is being enriched only up to permissible levels.

And yet, these are not ordinary times. With the United States hell-bent on confrontation, Iran's announcement is being flashed around the world as proof that a nuclear bomb "could" be produced soon. The same journalists and analysts who served as Washington's accomplices in Iraq are back in business, egging the war party on again. Last week, Brian Ross of ABC News ran [a breathless exclusive](#) quoting unnamed sources about how the new centrifuges mean Iran "could have enough material for a nuclear bomb by 2009." And who is Brian Ross? As salon.com columnist Glenn Greenwald [reminds us in an excellent bit of media forensics](#), Mr. Ross and ABC "were the driving force, really the exclusive force, behind news reports strongly suggesting that Iraq and Saddam Hussein were responsible for the anthrax attacks on the U.S." in 2001, a story which later segued into the general drive for war in 2003.

In theory, as every western news story on Iran reminds us, "uranium enriched to low levels can fuel reactors; if enriched to high levels, it can fuel nuclear weapons." But in reality, there is no danger of Natanz enriching uranium to weapon-grade levels so long as the facility remains under safeguards. In other words, unless Iran has another large facility hidden somewhere in the desert with thousands of centrifuges spinning away — and manages to keep it undetected for at least a couple of years — Tehran has no way of accumulating enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a nuclear weapons programme.

Iran's failure to satisfy the IAEA about the work it did on the P-2 centrifuge design purchased from the A.Q. Khan network has led some analysts to suggest it could have built a secret P-2 facility to service a weapons programme. But there are three reasons why this is unlikely. First, the poor quality of Iranian yellowcake and UF₆, as well as Iran's inability fully to master even the more basic P-1 centrifuge technology at the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant (PFEP) at Natanz is [an open secret](#) within the international arms control community. A hidden facility assumes a certain level of mastery over the difficult enrichment process. If just two cascades of P-1 centrifuges at the PFEP have been plagued by crashes and other problems, there is little chance Iran could have managed to construct and run a facility with

the more advanced P-2.

Secondly, despite the fact that a country with a vast hidden facility is unlikely to take on the risk of discovery by surprise inspection, Iran voluntarily accepted the more stringent inspection regime of the Additional Protocol for two years till January 2006. During this period, when the IAEA essentially had a 'go as you please pass' to any location in Iran at short notice, no clandestine nuclear facilities were discovered. Given the fact that 24x7, wall-to-wall satellite imagery of Iran has been available to the National Security Agency for several years now, Washington had the ability to send the IAEA to any set of coordinates that looked suspicious. Yet nothing turned up.

Thirdly, the existence of a secret enrichment facility presupposes the existence of secret feedstock. In other words, Iran would need to have parallel stocks of yellowcake or UF₆ because IAEA safeguards on declared stocks mean no diversion is possible. And so far, there is no evidence that such parallel stocks exist. Of course, in 2003 the IAEA reported Iran's failure to declare the one-time import of yellowcake from China as well as a number of other enrichment and plutonium separation-related experiments. It is these omissions — which were arguably no more dangerous than the 'experiments' South Korea and Taiwan concealed from the IAEA for years — that formed the basis for the Agency's Board of Governors to declare Iran in violation of its safeguards agreement in September 2005. But since 2003, all those Iranian omissions have been resolved and the Chinese yellowcake is being treated as a "routine" safeguards issue by the IAEA.

"You can't bomb knowledge"

There is, of course, the possibility that the Iranians could use the safeguarded low-enriched uranium (LEU) produced at Natanz as feedstock for HEU. This would presuppose a termination of the Iranian safeguards agreement with the IAEA as well as Iran's renunciation of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). But this problem of "breakout" is not unique to Iran alone. There are dozens of countries that could walk out of the NPT and utilise existing safeguarded stocks of LEU, HEU or plutonium for eventual weapons production. The reason nobody assumes they ever will is because these countries are all embedded in a wider political and security environment that makes the pursuit of nuclear weapons unnecessary and even counter-productive.

Iran is treated with suspicion because it finds itself beset with insecurity but the irony is that the international community is doing little to make Tehran feel more secure. Its greatest enemy, the U.S. — which has sought the ouster of the Islamic regime ever since the 1979 revolution and has sanctioned its oil and gas industry for years — is today in military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington and Tel Aviv frequently invoke the spectre of war. Because of the Iraq quagmire, the U.S. realises it needs to properly pace and calibrate the use of military means against Tehran. Above all, it needs a plausible *casus belli*, which can help transcend the suspicion the Iraq disaster has generated. And that *casus belli* is to provoke Iran into downgrading its ties with the IAEA and breaking out of the NPT. The sanctions that the Bush administration has pushed through the U.N., then, are not aimed at forcing Iran to climb down. Their aim is to force Tehran to climb up the ladder of confrontation.

As they plan their next steps, the Iranian leadership will no doubt be aware of what Washington's diplomatic strategy is. Tuesday's announcement is a clear sign that Iran is not

going to be coerced into abandoning its enrichment programme. For all their apparent grandstanding, the Iranians have been rather astute in defending their legitimate right to a civilian nuclear programme and fuel cycle. By upping the ante every time they come under unreasonable pressure, they have managed to create new facts on the ground. In turn, these facts make it more difficult for Washington to achieve its goals through “peaceful” coercion such as arm-twisting Iran’s negotiating partners or imposing sanctions. It is as if, having correctly read America’s aggressive military intentions, Iran has decided not to give the Pentagon the luxury of choosing a time for attack best suited to itself. By inducing a premature delivery, Iran hopes the war the U.S. is planning will be stillborn.

In 2005, Iran responded to the European-3’s insulting proposal to abandon enrichment altogether by ending its voluntary suspension of enrichment. When the IAEA sent its file to the U.N. Security Council, it suspended its acceptance of the Additional Protocol. All the while, Iran has been running its centrifuges and is now on the verge of going “industrial scale.” In an interview to *Financial Times* in February this year, IAEA Director General Mohammad el-Baradei [gently hinted](#) that the U.S. was wasting precious time by insisting Iran suspend its enrichment programme before a dialogue could begin. Iran had now acquired important technical know-how from running its pilot nuclear programme, he told FT, and there was no going back now. “You cannot bomb knowledge,” he said.

Dr. el-Baradei is right. Even if Iran decides to go for nuclear weapons, it would be an act of supreme folly for America to think war is an option, let alone an answer. Iran says it does not want the bomb. Iran says it is interested in a wider dialogue aimed at increasing security and confidence in West Asia. It is high time the U.S. abandoned its insistence on preconditions and started talking.

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