

Developments in Iran's Nuclear Program – The Double Deception

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The past 10 days have seen several developments connected to Iran's nuclear program. In a January 31, 2010 television interview, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced out of the blue that Iran had agreed to the uranium exchange deal that it had rejected repeatedly since October 2009. This announcement came several days after it was reported that the U.S. was deploying missile defense systems in the Gulf. However, on February 7, 2010, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran would begin to enrich uranium by itself, to a level of 20%, and that it had attained laser technology for uranium enrichment. The Iranian daily Kayhan, which is close to Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei, even declared that, once Iran enriches uranium to 20%, the West will not be able to stop it at that level of enrichment, and would have to negotiate with it over higher levels of enrichment.[1]

These developments reveal deception by both parties – Iran and the West – vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program. Iran under the NPT advanced step by step towards military nuclear status, disguising its intentions all along the way. As for the West, it is presenting its policy as aimed at helping Iran, while its diplomatic measures, and especially the uranium exchange deal, are really aimed at hampering Iran's nuclear progress. This deepens Iran's distrust, for it understands the deal's real purpose.

This paper will examine the recent developments in Iran's nuclear program:

Why Won't Iran Hand Over Its 1,200 Kg of Enriched Uranium for Further Enrichment in the West?

In the past months, Iran has adamantly rejected the proposal that the West presents as aimed at helping it by providing it with 20% enriched uranium for its research reactor in Tehran.[2] The reason for this refusal is that, according to the West's intention, the uranium handed over would indeed be enriched to a higher level, but at the same time would be altered so that it could not be enriched further for military use – and this is a deal that Iran refused to accept. In their public statements, Iran's spokesmen do not bring up this point, but they have stated repeatedly that they basically do not trust the West. For example, Majlis speaker Ali Larijani warned at a February 6 conference in Tehran that the West was trying to deceive Iran with the nuclear deal but that the West should know that his country is not falling for it: "The truth is that you [Westerners] are conducting a sort of political deceit in order to separate Iran from [its] enriched uranium... But you need to know... that the Iranians are not naive." [3]

It should be further noted that Iran has no need for 1,200 kg of 20%-enriched uranium which is the quantity arbitrarily set by the West in the deal. The Tehran research reactor requires only 30 kg of 20%-enriched uranium for its operations, and this quantity is equal to about 400 kg of 5%-enriched uranium; furthermore, this quantity will last it until the reactor ceases to be operational, in about a decade.

Iran's position is that if the West does indeed want only to help Iran, as it says, then Tehran does not need to enrich more than 400 kg, but the West is demanding that Iran hand over 1,200 kg, which constitutes 75% of its enriched uranium stock. This demand proves that the West wants to maintain its nuclear military hegemony and to prevent Iran from attaining military nuclear status. For this reason, Iran is adamant that it will not hand over its strategic reserves to the West.

The position presented in recent days by Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki focuses on the ongoing dispute between Iran and the superpowers vis-à-vis the quantity of lower-level enriched uranium that Iran would hand over for enrichment. At the 46th Munich Security Conference (February 5-7, 2010), Mottaki portrayed as likely Iran's acceptance of a deal, and said that Iran and the IAEA had already agreed to the nuclear deal with a third country and that all that remained was to set the time, place, and quantity of uranium that Iran would hand over. However, he stressed that "it is the Iranian side that will set the scope [of the uranium] exchange [deal], with attention to its own needs" and that "the quantity of nuclear fuel [enriched to 3.5% that Iran will agree to transport from its territory] will be in accordance with Iran's needs, and the moment that Iran announces what this quantity is, the deal will be able to go ahead." [4]

Nevertheless, an Iranian official told the Iranian news agency Fars that Iran had not changed its position towards the deal proposed at the Vienna conference, on October 19-21, 2009 – despite reports in recent days about a "softer" stance being adopted vis-à-vis the nuclear deal.[5] In addition, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced in an interview on Iranian television that Tehran does not oppose an uranium exchange deal outside Iranian soil, adding that circles in Iran had raised an unnecessary stink over the issue; however, he ignored the issue on which Iran and the West disagree – that is, the quantity of enriched uranium that Tehran is willing to hand over.[6]

Ahmadinejad: I Ordered 20% Uranium Enrichment; We Have Laser Technology

At the same time, in a step typical of Iran's nuclear policy, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched a new phase in Tehran's struggle against the superpowers with his defiant February 7 declaration that he had already ordered the start of 20% uranium enrichment – thus obviating the need for dialogue with the West or for compliance with the nuclear deal. At the same venue, which was a conference titled "Iran's Laser Technology Achievements," Ahmadinejad said: "I ordered the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization [Ali Akbar Salehi] to begin enriching uranium to 20%, but the path of dialogue remains open." He added: "Iran has attained the ability to enrich uranium using laser technology, and with this method it is possible to perform enrichment faster and more accurately, and to any [enrichment] level – but actually we do not plan to use this method." [7] He added, "Of course, if these countries [i.e. the 5+1] come to us without preconditions, the way to an exchange deal is still open." [8]

The next day, Iranian Atomic Energy Organization chief Ali Akbar Salehi said that on February 9 Iran would begin to enrich uranium at 20% at the Natanz facility, and noted that despite its ability to enrich uranium to any level it desires, Iran preferred the option of acquiring the nuclear fuel plates from a foreign country. In addition, he declared that Iran would construct, within the year (i.e. March 2010 to March 2011), 10 uranium enrichment centers. [9]

The conservative daily Kayhan, which is close to Khamenei, even stated in a February 9 editorial that the West had missed the opportunity to stop Iran at 5% enrichment, and that the minute Iran enriches uranium to 20%, the West will not be able to stop it from advancing further. At that point, Iran will not agree to stop at 20%, and the negotiations will be over enrichment to a higher level. [10]

It should be noted that Iran possesses 1,600 kg of 5%-enriched uranium (5% is the level permitted under IAEA regulations for generating power; the country must announce that it will be enriching it and must obtain advance approval). However, it is continuing its intensive work to enrich more uranium, even though it has no plant or nuclear reactor that requires such quantities of enriched uranium for operation. Furthermore, the Bushehr reactor, which has not yet begun operating, does not require locally enriched uranium, because under the agreement that Iran signed with Moscow in 2005, Moscow is providing the fuel rods to operate it, and Iran has been receiving them since 2007.

In these circumstances, it is very peculiar that the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization director Salehi announced that Iran will construct 10 additional uranium enrichment centers; it means that Iran can be suspected of enriching uranium for military purposes.

The West's Weakness in Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Issue

Again and again, the West has called on Iran to accept its ultimatums, which Iran knows are toothless; this approach exposes the West's, and particularly the U.S.'s and Europe's, inability to deal with Iran in the vital issues of global security and stability.

The West's unwillingness to publicly acknowledge that the "deal" that it proposed is not really aimed at helping Iran, as it claims, but rather at preventing Iran from using the enriched uranium for military purposes, strips the West of its credibility vis-à-vis Tehran.

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Endnotes:

[1] Kayhan (Iran), February 9, 2010.

[2] It should be recalled that the October 2009 Vienna talks did not produce any deal, and the statements of former IAEA secretary-general Mohamed ElBaradei at the conclusion of the talks, namely that Iran must respond to the proposal within two days, referred to a proposal to which Iran was not party in any way, and which was formulated exclusively by the West and ElBaradei. In fact, Iran contended that the talks did not even deal with the future of its nuclear program, but with its request to purchase 20% uranium for the operation of its Tehran research reactor. See MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 557, "The Vienna Nuclear Talks – and Iranian/Western Rashomon," October 25, 2009, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/108/0/3771.htm>; MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis No. 564, "Iran's Answer to the West: 'Iran Has Lost Its Patience'; 'We've Already Begun Production [of 20%-Enriched Uranium]'", November 17, 2009, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/108/0/3803.htm>.

[3] Al-Alam (Iran), February 7, 2010.

[4] ILNA (Iran), February 6, 2010.

[5] Fars, Iran, February 6, 2010.

[6] Fars (Iran), February 6, 2010.

[7] ILNA (Iran), February 7 2010. Iran's official presidency website quoted Ahmadinejad as saying: "Today we can announce with pride that the scientists and experts of our country are pushing the frontiers of knowledge in the laser domain, and perhaps there is only one country in the world that precedes us [in this area] and we must reduce this gap quickly by redoubling [our] aspirations and efforts... Laser enrichment enables to enrich various quantities of uranium with

high accuracy and speed and at suitable quality. Of course, Iran actually has no intent to use laser in this area, and with the grace of God we will begin enriching uranium to 20% using the centrifuges already in existence, and we will no longer need [external help]." Iranian presidency website (Iran), February 7, 2010.

[8] Fars (Iran), February 7, 2010.

[9] ISNA (Iran), February 8, 2010. The Iranian news agency ILNA reported, citing Al-Jazeera TV, that Iran has informed the IAEA that it is beginning to enrich uranium to 20% in the Natanz facility. IRLA (Iran), February 8, 2010.

[10] Kayhan (Iran), February 9, 2010.

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3962.htm>