

Ways Out of the Atomic Dead-End

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Iran. President Ahmadinejad declares the nuclear dispute finished. An idle wish. But what could a solution actually look like? Here is a synopsis of current expert opinions.

Nuclear question: check; on to the next issue. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad surprised the UN General Assembly with this rather idiosyncratic interpretation of the nuclear debate. “In our opinion, the nuclear issue of Iran is now closed and has become an ordinary Agency matter,” he announced.

The reaction from the office of the IAEA Director General Mohammad El-Baradei was: “No comment.” It is impossible to know how the IAEA director feels about Ahmadinejad’s latest statement. In his Vienna office there is a clear refusal to take position on the nuclear debate, in light of the recent snub by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who criticized the IAEA director’s “political statements.” El-Baradei’s “offense”: He had warned against a war-rhetoric-hype and had made a solo attempt to formulate a plan with Iran.

The El-Baradei Plan

According to this plan, the Iranian government would have to answer all technical questions regarding its nuclear program within the next three months and thereby clarify its peaceful nature once and for all.

For its part, Iran would be willing to clarify the reasons behind a document that Tehran almost certainly received from Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of the Pakistani atom bomb. The document contains an explanation of how to form weapon-grade uranium into so-called hemispheres – a form that is necessary to build a bomb.

If Iran really does deliver all of the information and if it demonstrates sustained willingness for transparency, then the crisis could really be resolved, in the mind of the IAEA Director General. El-Baradei said in the latest publication of the US news magazine *Newsweek*: “It’s a litmus test for Iran. In two or three months we’ll know if Iran is serious about coming clean.” And if Iran is just trying to gain time? El-Baradei says: “[T]hen, obviously, nobody—*nobody*—will come to its support when people call for more sanctions or for punitive measures.”

Analysis of the Problem & Possible Solutions

How then can it continue? Austrian Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, the director of the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University invited a group of

high-ranking diplomats and experts from the US, EU, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran to Liechtenstein, in order to disentangle the complicated problem surrounding Iran.

Die Presse reports under the condition of anonymity regarding the content of the at-times highly explosive conversation.

1. The nuclear dispute and Iranian domestic politics

Within the Iranian regime there is a clash between the 'brinkmen' and the 'normalizers'. The brinkmen welcome the nuclear dispute as an instrument to hinder any attempts, such as those of former President Mohammed Khatami, towards a rapprochement with the West. An observer of Iranian domestic politics added that the nuclear program has found wide-spread support across the political camps.

2. Chaotic Iran or Stabilizing Factor?

It is not only the nuclear program that is of concern, but also Iran's growing influence in the Gulf region since the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The concern of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries regarding the regime in Tehran is that its power is spreading in the region. In addition, Israel, according to the Begin-Doctrine, maintains the right of a preventive strike against any Middle Eastern state with nuclear aspirations. The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak in 1981 was based on this doctrine. Another participant from an Arab Gulf state warned an Iranian participant that a state like Saudi Arabia would "be forced to react to a threat by a nuclear-armed Iran." Israel is therefore not alone in its fear that the entire power-balance in the region might become unstable and result in an arms race across the Middle East.

A Strong Move Strengthens the Regime

A Western diplomat with strong ties to Kabul points out that Iran is indeed capable of 'constructive actions', as proven by its stabilization efforts in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.

Another participant supported this opinion and reminded participants of the importance to keep a 'cool head'. There might be a chance of 'internal corrections,' be it during the Iranian parliamentary elections in March 2008 or during the Presidential elections in 2009. "Attempts at regime change only serve to strengthen the radical powers," warns one diplomat. The change in the White House after the US elections in November 2008 would also offer a chance for a new US course in regard to Iran. One US expert with Iranian roots made note of the fact that "a weak Iran would be dangerous, but a strong Iran might serve as a stabilizing factor" [for the region].

3. "Cold Suspension" – The Cold Stop

The experts unanimously agreed that at the moment Iran has about 3000 centrifuges capable of uranium enrichment. One expert guessed that Iran could have a nuclear weapon between 2010 and 2015. The possible solutions were diversified: One speaker, with expertise on technical issues, suggested a compromise, which would allow both conflicting parties to save face. A so-called 'cold suspension' of the enrichment, or a 'cold stop' would function as follows: Iran would be allowed to continue to use centrifuges for uranium enrichment and testing. However, it would not be allowed to produce uranium hexafluoride – this gas allows the non-fissionable uranium isotopes to be separated from the easily fissionable uranium isotopes. Iran does not have to turn off its centrifuges, but nevertheless would not be allowed to enrich.

4. “Grand Bargain” – *The Solution of All Problems*

The alluring plan: The positive settlement of the nuclear dossier as a prelude for the complete normalization of relations between Iran and the US. A highly ambitious undertaking, since Iran is also allegedly involved in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, one of the ideological pillars of the Islamic Republic is anti-Americanism. To take away this support and move towards openness and détente, would be to threaten the end of the *Velayat-e faqih* (theocracy) – just as the Soviet Union did not survive the era of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

Possibly this is exactly what the West is betting on.