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Iran's Nuclear Program, A Pawn in A US-Russian Deal

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TEHRAN - Iran left the meeting with the P5+1 group (Britain, China, France, Russia, United States, plus Germany) in Kazakhstan—which took place in the country's former capital Almaty—under the impression that what was offered was both constructive and pragmatic. Eight months after the Baghdad conference, the P5+1 group acknowledged that it would have to come forth with “acceptable” proposals based on new grounds, with four prominent points:

Firstly, suspending Iran's uranium enrichment at the 20 percent level only, as opposed to the suspension of all enrichment operations, preserving its right to a 5 percent enrichment level. Secondly, reducing activities in the Fordo facility and terminating the installation of its centrifuge equipment, instead of the total closure of the facility as was previously suggested.

Thirdly, transferring the 20 percent enriched uranium to a third party abroad under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), or reprocessing it to a 5 percent enrichment level and keeping it inside Iran. Fourthly, increasing the IAEA's supervision of Iranian nuclear sites.

In return, the group pledged to provide Iran with uranium slugs required for operating the Tehran Nuclear Research Center for medical objectives, and to refrain from seeking the implementation of new international sanctions. The pledges also included lifting sanctions imposed on the Iranian gold and jewel trade as well as on Iranian petrochemicals, and deposing the ban on the purchase of aircrafts and spare parts to ensure the safety of civil Iranian aviation.

According to an informed Iranian source, Iran is anticipating that the upcoming expert-level meeting in Istanbul will focus on what is required from Iran and the returns it will gain. According to Iran, "cooperation must be met with cooperation."

On 24 February 2013 the British Daily Telegraph published an article and satellite images showing steam rising from the Arak heavy water production plant, indicating that it is ready for operation. The newspaper accused Iran of attempting to produce the plutonium needed for the construction of a nuclear bomb.

According to a nuclear expert, although these images have been published recently they are not new, and the IAEA reports that the heavy water plant has been functioning for years. Satellite images were used to confirm the status of operation yet the IAEA stated that "one cannot deduce from these images the actual amount of heavy water produced".

The reactor at Arak heavy water production plant is still under construction. It requires 90 tons of heavy water in order to begin operating, and the Iranians have yet to attain such a quantity. Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, the Iranian vice president and head of Iran's nuclear program, stated that the reactor will begin functioning by early 2014. However, according to a former IAEA official, such optimism is irrelevant in view of the current heavy water production rate, and especially since the manufacture of 20 percent enriched uranium is yet to begin at the Isfahan plant, despite the fact that the fundamental elements of uranium conversion have already been observed there. The nuclear expert added, "we have to expect the Arak reactor to be a real danger by the second half of 2014, when the production of plutonium will begin". It is worth noting that heavy water production, the construction of the Arak plant, and the manufacturing of fuel all are restricted activities for Iran according to the UN Security Council's resolutions.

When the plant begins to operate, it is estimated to produce 8 to 12 kilograms of plutonium annually, providing another means for Iran to acquire nuclear capabilities. This type of reactor, and volume of plutonium, were used previously in the Indian CIRUS reactor (providing the uranium for India's first nuclear experiment in 1974) as well as in the Pakistani Khushab nuclear complex (that witnessed an explosion in April 2008 due to a gas leak) in order to produce heavy water in the Punjab province.

Such reactors are used to produce plutonium for mass-destruction programs, not for peaceful purposes or as an alternative to the Tehran Nuclear Research Center, as the Iranians claim. The

original Arak plant blueprint contained a design for a large hot cell, which could isolate plutonium from the fuel in use, a detail that Iran withdrew later on when questioned by the IAEA about the actual purpose of such a design.

Nevertheless, according to the nuclear expert, if work commences at the Arak plant before a political solution with Iran is reached, a problem is bound to emerge. The international community will then have to deal with this before the reactor receives the necessary nuclear fuel. In turn, “a schedule must be drawn up and monitored.”

From its side, Israel senses that diplomatic talks with Iran will be to no avail and it will find itself forced to prevent Iran—regardless of America’s standpoint—from producing the plutonium necessary for manufacturing a bomb in Arak. This would entail a military strike before work commences on the plan, the same tactic used by Israel with regards to the Osirak plant in Iraq. If the Arak plant was to start functioning, an assault on it would be extremely dangerous in terms of the risks of unleashing highly radioactive fuel.

Even if a political settlement is reached with Iran, the international community must oversee the Arak plant before it receives its first shipment of fuel, even if under the protection of the IAEA. It is highly probable that Iran will withdraw from the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons when the plant is in operation, and so the danger is impending. There are no sufficient guarantees that this won’t happen under the current regime.

In addition to the Arak plant there is also the Bushehr reactor, control of which is due to be handed over from Russia to the Iranian authorities this month. However, the facility is likely to be out of action for two or three months due to emergency problems with the main power generator.

According to international experts, handing this reactor over to the Iranian authorities does not mean it will really be in the hands of the Iranians. Inevitably, Iran will exploit this event to serve its propaganda in the media as well as in the political sphere. However, the operation of the plant will remain under the supervision of the Russian administration, given that Iran has signed three agreements regarding the Bushehr plant for the next two years: One agreement entitles the Russians to continue operating the plant, a second one allows them to maintain it, and the third entails providing Iran with expertise and technical support.

Thus far, the Iranians have refused to sign the Convention on Nuclear Safety. The reason for this could in fact be political since some Iranian politicians, in meetings with IAEA officials, have expressed a strong desire to sign the convention as it will offer them the chance to adopt modern techniques and methods of nuclear safety, and will entitle them to participate in specialized courses and conferences. However, the Iranian leadership is still seeking to maintain its bargaining chips with regards to negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Furthermore, Iran does not want to completely reassure its neighboring states, claiming that the signing of an early “warning agreement” is more than enough for now.