

2023 and Iran's Nuclear Intent

Tom Gregg

Iran is back in the news. This time it's not about Tehran's nuclear ambitions or the status of nuclear negotiations. Instead, it's the wave of civil unrest and the authorities' violent suppression of protesters that was unleashed when Mahsa Amini, a young 22-year-old woman, was taken into custody by Iran's morality police for not adequately covering her hair. She died in custody. In addition, the media reports on Iran's support for Russia's war in Ukraine after Iranian drones were deployed by Russia with devastating effect against civilian infrastructure across Ukraine.

With this as a backdrop, it's easy to see why news about Iran's nuclear ambitions aren't reaching the front page. However, they should be, and many analysts and regional capitals suggest Iran is a nuclear threshold state that could soon produce a nuclear weapon.

The Iran Nuclear Agreement is on Life Support with Prospects Fading

The 2015 agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, limited Iran's uranium enrichment activity to make it harder for Tehran to develop nuclear arms, in return for lifting international sanctions. Iran began breaching those terms in 2019 in response to the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018 under then-President Trump. Despite Teheran's insistence that it does not seek to acquire nuclear weapons, it has accelerated its nuclear program, installing hundreds more advanced centrifuges. Over the past 3 years, this approach has seen Iran increasing its capacity to enrich well beyond the limits set by the 2015 agreement.

When President Biden took office, he appointed a Special Envoy to Iran to explore the possibility of a revised nuclear diplomatic deal. Despite all sides coming close to reaching an agreement both in March and then again in August of this year, it now seems very unlikely that an agreement can be reached and both sides have walked away from table. Last week, Iran claimed that it had started to enrich uranium to 60% at its underground and heavily fortified Fordo facility, having already done so at its above-ground facility, Natanz over the past 12 months. Rafael Grossi, the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, also confirmed their assessment sharing that he had been informed by Teheran that it intended 'tripling, not doubling, tripling their capacity to enrich uranium at 60'. Enrichment to 60% purity is one short technical step away from weapons grade, 90% purity. Nuclear scientists and nonproliferation experts have recently warned that Iran has enough 60% enriched uranium to reprocess into fuel for at least one nuclear bomb.

'Plan B'

In July this year, the U.S. and Israel committed to the Jerusalem Declaration, a joint pledge to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon. 'If Iran gets an operational nuclear weapon, all bets are off,' Saudi's Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud warned last week at the World Policy Conference in Abu Dhabi. A more adversarial Plan B is now being considered. At its most extreme, it includes a warning by President Biden that the U.S. is willing to use force against Iran as a 'last resort'. The hope, however, is that a policy of containment, backed up by the threat of military force, and possible covert sabotage of Iran's nuclear plants, will be sufficient pressure to contain Iran. Under such an approach, the U.S.

and its allies would extend sanctions, and target Chinese private and state-owned companies importing Iranian crude. In September this year, analysts noted that Israel and Boeing signed a deal for the supply of 4 of its most advanced air refuelers. These air assets would allow Israel long-range air strike capability. The odd bedfellows of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, allied in their shared interests on Iran will likely deepen cooperation.

As Grossi, the UN Nuclear Head, cautioned last week on Iranian developments, 'this is not banal. This is something that has consequences'.



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