
SANCTIONING MIXED MEASURES

An international conference held in Luxembourg last week revealed that, contrary to common concern, the Iranian threat is not being brushed aside by the world's nuclear powers.

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Let's get the bad news over with first. Or at least that which was revealed last week in Luxembourg, at the International Conference on Preventing a Nuclear Catastrophe, organized by Russian Jewish billionaire Viatcheslav Kantor's European Jewish Fund. The world doesn't know much about the Iranian nuclear program - where all its components are located, how far the weaponization process has advanced - and can't stomach the idea of a direct military assault to put a stop to it. Discussions on Iran in international forums are evidence that all sorts of conflicting interests are pulling policy in different and sometimes contradictory directions. All the while, nuclear know-how spreads to failed states (and states that could easily fail) and terror organizations grow more sophisticated and ambitious. Most ominously, nobody can say with confidence that the world's enriched nuclear material, kept in 130 locations around the globe under the oversight of governments of varying competence, is secure over the long term.

It is a grim scenario. But, said participants at the conference, on the issue of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon - which attracted 60 delegates, among them nuclear scientists and veteran craftsmen of nuclear policy representing 10 countries, including the US, Russia, China, India and the EU - the situation is not all bad.

Here's the good news, at least from Israel's perspective: Officials and policymakers from the EU, US and Russia, and even India and China, are deeply worried about a potential Iranian nuclear weapon. Without the slightest bit of Israeli cajoling - indeed, the two Israeli delegates, former Mossad man Prof. Uzi Arad and senior Atomic Energy Commission official Dr. Ariel Levite, were silent throughout most of the deliberations - Iran's program was singled out as an intolerable threat to the world order. According to those in attendance, the world's powers are committed to preventing an Iranian nuclear bomb, and believe that Iran is vulnerable enough - and the threat urgent enough - to make this possible.

Contrary to what some here have suggested on a regular basis, the Iranian threat is not being brushed aside by the world's nuclear powers. An Iranian bomb, it is feared, will lead inevitably to Saudi and Egyptian ones, and could drive an Israeli-Muslim nuclear arms race. The spread of nuclear weapons into the hands of governments close to international terror networks would leave the nuclear status quo in shambles. Even the Russians, represented by such senior figures as Federal Agency for Atomic Energy head Sergey Kirienko, were remarking that a nuclear Iran was hardly in Moscow's interest.

As Mark Fitzpatrick, a fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a former US deputy assistant secretary of state for non-proliferation, said diplomatically, there was something of a consensus "regarding the contention that the world would be worse off if Iran continues to develop nuclear capabilities." He told The Jerusalem Post

that "no one in the room doubts Iran is seeking capability, and there's concern as to how close Iran is getting to that capability."

It is this international consensus that has led to sanctions being imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council under Article 7 of the UN charter.

The question for most attendees was not whether Iran was seeking a nuclear weapon, but what to do about it. The recognition of the danger did not translate into an automatic call for military strikes on believed development sites, but neither did attendees categorically reject such a strike.

Why was a strike widely seen as a bad idea? If the main goal of international efforts to stop Iran's nuclear program is a change in the country's policy, a strike would do damage to the political efforts and would fail to eliminate the infrastructure of the nuclear program.

According to several experts, an attack on Iran would ignite patriotism, leading to a popular rallying around the flag and a boost to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's stature.

Furthermore, as the International Atomic Energy Agency said last week, Iran now knows how to enrich uranium, and this knowledge, unlike bunkers, laboratories and other infrastructure, cannot be destroyed from the air. So any short-lived attack, though possibly devastating in its ferocity would fail to destroy the program or cause the sought-after change in policy.

Even a protracted campaign of air strikes, no-fly zones and attacks on infrastructure, something the US might be capable of, would fail to destroy the working knowledge that could restore the program once the political window for a military attack had closed. So while a strike might delay the nuclear program, it could not stop it.

In addition, several attendees, including Perry, suggested that the reaction in the international system against the perpetrator of the strike would be prohibitively expensive for many potential allies of Israel or the US. For Israel, a strike could have no goal other than a temporary slowdown of the program, while it would grant Iran the political capital of victimhood which would help it speed up the program. For the Bush administration, such an aggressive move would constitute a massive gamble for a leadership that has already gambled much in an uncertain and what a majority of Americans now believe is an unsuccessful attempt at aggressively refashioning the Middle East's strategic environment.

But Iran is not as invincible as it pretends. Its ambitions are severely curtailed by economic and social problems, not least of which is the painful underdevelopment in its oil industry.

The US refusal to import Iranian oil, partial sanctions since 1995 on companies seeking to develop the petroleum infrastructure in Iran and the steady degradation of that infrastructure over time have meant that it produced just 3.9 million barrels per day in 2006, five percent below its OPEC quota, according to BusinessWeek. Compare this to 6.1 million barrels per day under the Shah in 1974. This production is said to be declining by 300,000 barrels a day with each passing year. Similarly, a country that sits on a whopping 130 billion barrels of oil currently imports some 40% of its refined oil products.

While recent high oil prices have amounted to a large increase in income, the government also increased social spending by 21% last year. With gasoline prices set

at under 40 US cents per gallon (about 43 agorot a liter, lower than the cost of drinking water), consumption by ordinary Iranians has risen sharply every year, increasing pressure on the woefully inadequate local oil industry.

Any cutoff of Iran's oil exports would mean a sharp spike in world oil prices, but oil revenue also accounts for some 40% of the government's income. It's not at all clear who would suffer more from turning off the tap.

In short, say analysts, Iran is especially vulnerable to international sanctions. Implemented effectively, such measures could destabilize the regime.

The sense that there is a stark choice between a military strike or diplomacy, evident in how the issue is often framed in the media and by politicians, is misleading. Conference attendees saw a different underlying distinction: between those who wish to stop Iran's program through some mixture of discussions and the threat of violence, and those who have resigned themselves to an Iranian bomb - in the words of Arad, between "the appeasers and the opposers".

Most of the world's nuclear powers, if the mood at the conference is any indication are among the latter.

"I would never say never," Perry told the Post when asked if a military strike was likely. "But it would clearly be a very last resort, and we're so far from that right now it's not worth thinking about it.

Calling for "a common voice, a common strategy... much more robust sanctions and serious discussions," he was careful not to rule out a military option. While emphatically stating he had no knowledge of American preparations for a strike, he said, "I don't believe there's any attractive military option... and we should be focusing on diplomacy."

Furthermore, said another attendee, a strike would be most likely to bring down the current regime and effect a permanent change in policy if it followed a string of diplomatic and economic sanctions that made Iran's choice seem stark and obvious. Diplomacy, too, could only be pursued in the shadow of the threat of a military strike, something many of the advocates of diplomacy at the conference seemed to be depending on.

It is, so to speak, a strategic game of "good cop, bad cop," with both cops fully aware that neither can get the job done alone. Diplomacy would not be credible without the threat of a strike, while a strike that was not preceded by extensive diplomacy and economic sanctions stood a much lower chance of having the necessary effect on Iranian politics.

As Arad put it, "that a military option was prepared in Israel and America is certain. The plans are always ready," and in encouraging the diplomatic process as a way of avoiding the real possibility of force, "the very existence of [such plans] helps to prevent their execution."

There was serious talk of forming a "Luxembourg Forum," bringing the 60 participants together for renewed discussions on an annual or biannual basis. A handful of attendees believed this would be a good idea, as it would lead to the formation of a special forum of professionals dedicated to dealing seriously, competently and as apolitically as can be expected with the problems of a nuclear age.

Yet, Arad, who has spent decades analyzing nuclear policy, warned not to be too optimistic at the positive signs coming from the conference. Nuclear non-proliferation is

a complex game, and the world's powers are not completely of one mind as to how it should be played.

"It's like watching soccer, and seeing only one team," he said. "You'd have to be impressed. But if you looked at the opposing team, and you saw its power, drive and strategy, then you'd be concerned that we may be too weak to face them. What worries me, worries everyone who looks at the struggle between Iran's desire to reach nuclear arms and the efforts to prevent it, is that it's not at all clear that there is enough strength and concentrated resources on our side."

So while "there are many people who are seriously dealing with the issue, the size of the problem, the opposition and the seriousness of the threat are very great."