IAEA – Iran: a formalistic approach to overcoming differences

The international community’s attention is still focused on Iran’s nuclear program, and it expects, if not breakthroughs, at least progress in Iran’s negotiations with the mediator group (the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, China and Germany). In 2012, members of the P5+1 and Tehran held three rounds of negotiations: in Istanbul (April 14), in Baghdad (May 23-24) and in Moscow (June 18-19). All of these meetings concluded without significant progress. The next full-format negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran will take place in late January; their venue is not yet clear. But the dialogue with the IAEA got underway in mid-January in Tehran.

The IAEA belongs to the UN, but it is an independent organization. The IAEA has two main objectives. The first is to expand the use of nuclear energy. That was one of the main reasons behind the establishment of the international agency. The IAEA facilitates the transfer of nuclear technologies for use in industry, medicine and other fields. Its second objective — and this is the one that receives the most interest — is to oversee non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Agency’s priority regarding Iran is oversight of its nuclear program. Saeed Jalili, the Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, notes that in recent years IAEA inspectors have visited various Iranian nuclear facilities more than 5000 times, and 25 Agency reports reflect the results of their inspections. Nevertheless, the negotiators in this format have many unresolved questions, and Iran has failed to prove its nuclear program has no military component, or it has so far not wanted to do so.

The Persians have a proverb that says: “In olden times cunning had both wit and valor.” In fairness, however, we should recognize that the IAEA is also cunning. But we can say that in general both sides have become accustomed to each other. They have got used to the lack of progress and are not surprised by mutual recriminations and claims that have not changed for years despite the IAEA’s much-hyped supposedly new tack that involves a structured approach to resolving existing differences. The agency has decided to break down the overall task of determining whether Iran has a military nuclear program into a number of subtasks (a subtask tree) in order to then resolve each problem separately, and possibly some in combination. The main element of the structured approach is systematic oversight of the level of percentage risk from a multi-level hierarchy of characteristics within the uniform architecture of Iran’s nuclear program. Based on that, it proposes signing an agreement in which both parties will identify all facilities, documents and programs subject to IAEA inspection, determine the frequency of inspections and then proceed with an incremental and phased review.

Commenting on the outcome of the January negotiations, the IAEA’s chief expert on Iran’s nuclear program, Herman Nackaerts, said that they have so far failed to overcome their differences and develop a structured approach to resolving existing problems, including the possible use of Iran’s nuclear program for military purposes. His statement led many news agencies to assess the current stage as a failure, and they were quick to conclude that there has been no progress in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Iran’s opinions and assessments are generally given little consideration. That happens partly because Tehran does not do a good job of defending its position in the media, and to some extent because of the ideological rationale of Iran’s political opponents, who control the Western mass media, and because the Western media’s reports are widely reproduced and quoted in most countries. Here it would be appropriate to look at how Iran assesses the outcome of the meeting.

For example, the English-language international news channel Press TV cited an assessment of the talks by Iran’s representative to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, who believes that the talks took place in a “very constructive
friendly environment” and “we have gone forward.” I might point out that the Iranians intended to “go forward,” and they suggested to the IAEA delegation that the talks continue with the delegation remaining in Tehran for a third day, but the international nuclear officials refused their proposal without reason.

According to reports in the Iranian media, the only issue on which the parties differed concerned unlimited access to the Parchin complex, which is a purely military facility and a restricted area of great importance to Iran’s national security. According to Reuters, Nackaerts also said the Iranians refused to grant access to the Iranian nuclear facility in Parchin. Another way of putting it is that the Iranians consider Parchin a military facility, whereas the IAEA looks upon it as a nuclear facility.

The IAEA’s complaints against Iran for prohibiting visits to Parchin can be said to have their own special history in the negotiations. The Iranians have repeatedly refused to let IAEA delegates visit Parchin, which, according to Saeed Jalili, Iran’s chief negotiator on nuclear issues, cannot serve as a tourist attraction for guests from the IAEA. We are also trying to understand this eastern suburb of Tehran that has received such international notoriety because of its involvement or noninvolvement in Iran’s nuclear program.

Parchin’s history dates back to 1939, when the first small arms and ammunition factory started operating there. It is essentially an ordinary industrial site located in a suburb near the east side of multi-million population Tehran, clearly unsuited to conducting nuclear tests. The facility belongs to Iran’s Defense Industry Organization and, according to Iranian sources, has no relationship with the Atomic Energy Organization, which is directly subordinate to the country’s president.

An American spy satellite shot photos of it in 1997. They were analyzed by Western experts who said rocket engines similar to Russia’s R-12 were being tested there. According to an article in The Washington Post, at least six (and possibly eight) Shahab ballistic missile engine tests were conducted there. That may be true, but what does work on missile technology had to do with the IAEA? Incidentally, even then American experts expressed doubt that the industrial enterprise would be used for military nuclear research: “Neither the design of the facility nor the nature of the tests is unique to nuclear weapons,” said Jay C. Davis, former head of the US Defense Department’s Threat Reduction Agency. “This is always a problem in trying to detect nuclear activity, and one that only on-site inspection can establish.”

Iran has given in to the Agency’s perseverance and allowed the IAEA to inspect Parchin on two occasions in the past. In January 2005, for example, Iran agreed to an inspection of the facility, and IAEA experts found nothing suspicious. They were allowed to take soil samples at the site, and analysis showed no increased radiation. However, the United States remained unsatisfied. It says the inspection was too cursory, and the inspectors were not allowed into all of the buildings at the site. Incidentally, the IAEA delegation that inspected Parchin was headed by Belgian General Herman Nackaerts, who became the IAEA’s deputy director general and is now its chief expert on Iran’s nuclear program. The General is well-acquainted with Iran’s position — that any agreement with the IAEA for a new inspection of the Parchin non-nuclear facility must specify the scope and objectives of the inspection.

In that regard, Iranian international affairs expert Hassan Beheshtipour has correctly pointed out that Iran should not ignore what happened when the IAEA inspected Iraqi military facilities to search for evidence that Saddam’s regime was developing weapons of mass destruction. In his opinion, information collected during the Agency’s inspections of Iraqi military facilities was given to other countries a few years prior to the US invasion of Iraq. The Iranians believe this action by the IAEA damaged its international reputation and demonstrated that the Agency is politically dependent on the United States. In not allowing IAEA inspectors to visit Parchin at this time, Iran points to the danger that the international inspectors would leak classified information about its military facilities.

In conclusion, I note that the current round of IAEA negotiations looks like nothing so much as a warm-up for the P5+1 meeting. At the very least, the fact that both parties are saying the Parchin facility is an insurmountable obstacle indicates they are taking a formalistic approach to the capabilities of the Agency, which, like the Iranians, is awaiting new signals from Obama’s second term and his new administration regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Let us not forget that this is a protracted conflict, that the US Congress has a hostile attitude towards the Islamic regime, and that a climate of military hysteria has developed over Iran’s nuclear program. Obama has little room to maneuver on Iran, and there is still little confidence that he will defy Congress and ease the pressure on Iran.

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