

## Preventing a Nuclear Iran

By [Henry Sokolski](#)

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It was reported last week that, in anticipation of the May 23 multilateral nuclear talks with Iran in Baghdad, President Obama had already conceded that Iran can continue to enrich uranium so long as it does so at levels no higher than 5 percent — i.e., not weapons grade. This concession, leaked to the major news outlets but analyzed by none, gives self-defeating a bad name. It would not only make it easier for Tehran to break out and make nuclear weapons whenever it wants, but it would give Iran's neighbors every reason to demand similar nuclear-fuel-making "rights." With any luck, Iran will reject this offer. Meanwhile, Congress, which is already toying with legislation to tighten our nuclear-nonproliferation policies, should get busy.

Is the president's position really all that bad? His defenders insist that his 5 percent solution is simply pragmatic. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1737 demanded that Tehran cease making nuclear fuel. But demanding total suspension flies in the face of Iran's "inalienable" right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to make nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes. They also point out that Obama is firm in demanding that Iran open up selected military sites to inspection, close down its heavily fortified enrichment site at Fordo, and send as much as possible of the 20 percent enriched uranium it has produced so far to a third country. Iran, they note, has already begun to balk at these additional demands. The bottom line, in their view, is that the president's proposed deal gives the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) the access it needs to prevent Iran from taking the last steps toward making bombs, and that's all that matters.

What's wrong with this argument? First, there is no mention of nuclear-fuel making in the NPT's text, much less an inalienable right to this activity. All that is defended in the treaty is the right to develop and produce "peaceful nuclear energy." Getting within weeks of acquiring a bomb by making nuclear fuel — especially when doing so is uneconomical and is not technically required in order to produce nuclear power — ought not to qualify.

Second, even though the IAEA claims it can safeguard nuclear-fuel making against military diversion, it can't. This is hardly news. After all, if the IAEA could safeguard nuclear-fuel making, there wouldn't be much of a bone to pick with Iran. Maybe Tehran cheated in the past, but if IAEA safeguards could prevent it from making a bomb now, all we'd have to do is let the IAEA work its magic.

Unfortunately, this is one nuclear rabbit the IAEA can't pull out of its hat. Indeed, after failing over the last two decades to account for scores of bombs' worth of weapons-useable fuels at Japanese and British civilian nuclear plants, the IAEA clearly can't reliably detect diversions from declared nuclear-fuel-making facilities. As for detecting covert nuclear activities, Syria's covert nuclear reactor, Iran's covert construction of its Natanz enrichment plant — which went undetected for 18 years — and Iraq's covert nuclear activities all suggest how unreliable IAEA nuclear inspections can be.

Third, if Iran accepts President Obama's offer, it will be free to amass more centrifuges and enrich more material, making it easier for it to break out and acquire even more nuclear weapons than otherwise would be the case. As Greg Jones, the senior researcher at my Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, has made clear in his latest [report](#), trying to restrict Iran to enriching at only 5 percent or lower is effectively no restriction at all.

Of course, with Iran, these technical points are just the beginning. Even worse is the Iranian regime's militant hostility toward its Arab and Israeli neighbors; its frightening oppression of its own domestic political opponents; and its aggressive support of terrorists and oppressive political actors in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, Libya, and the Gulf. All of these bad habits will only worsen as Iran inches closer to acquiring nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, we cannot make any of these problems go away simply by keeping Iran nonnuclear. The underlying problem is the mullahs, and the only way to address this problem is to get them to leave. Here, it would help if the U.S. and its friends in and outside the Gulf had a plan to compete against the current rulers in Iran and its client states of Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, Shia Iraq, and beyond. But this will be possible only if Washington and its friends make clear, even as we talk with the mullahs, that their regime is illegitimate — i.e., if we follow the approach the U.S. took with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Beyond this, we must accept that President Obama has his negotiating position for the upcoming nuclear talks. Although one can criticize his offer, it's public now and effectively is spilt diplomatic milk. The trick now is not to cave on the harsher conditions Obama's offer contains — closing Fordo and opening up Parchin to inspection — and to make sure our diplomats reject any Iranian suggestions that we and our allies cut off support to Iran's domestic and foreign opponents. Assuming we don't back down on these points, Iran is likely to object.

In that case, the U.S. should announce that Tehran's rejection of our offer constitutes a nonproliferation-policy turning point and that, henceforth, the U.S. will do all it can with other states to restrict the spread of civilian nuclear-fuel making. This means that the Obama administration should start promoting the nuclear-nonproliferation Gold Standard: the set of conditions for civilian nuclear cooperation contained in the last nuclear deal Washington struck with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These conditions include asking prospective recipients of U.S. civilian nuclear cooperation that currently lack nuclear weapons to forswear making nuclear fuel and to open up their nuclear sites to intrusive inspection under an international agreement known as the Additional Protocol.

The White House is currently reviewing to what extent it should support this policy. If Iran rejects Obama's offer, though, backing the Gold Standard should be a no-brainer. Congress, meanwhile, is considering legislation that would require approval by both Houses before any proposed U.S. civilian nuclear cooperative agreement that failed to include the Gold Standard conditions could go into effect. Finally, and more important, China and South Korea, which must renew their nuclear cooperative agreements with the U.S. in the next three years, should be encouraged to adopt the Gold Standard regarding their nuclear exports. Russia, France, and Japan, which want to do nuclear business in the U.S., should also be approached.

In addition, we need to come clean about what the IAEA can and can't safeguard. We should work with the agency itself to make clear that while it can monitor nuclear-fuel making, it can't reliably detect diversions or find covert facilities. Getting this point out in the open would make it far easier to push back on future Irans and the claim that nuclear-fuel making is a "peaceful" activity. It is not, and it's dangerous.

Finally, the U.S. and its key allies need to get serious about putting the mullahs out to pasture. This means more than merely imposing economic sanctions or making a bombing run (the merits of which are open to debate). If we are truly serious about preventing nuclear proliferation and opposing Iran's bullying of its neighbors, we will have to think through what delegitimizing and disfranchising Iran's current rulers will require. It would also help if we had a long-term plan for how we intend to help reform the Middle East. We had such a plan for Western Europe after World War II and for Latin America during the 1980s. The Middle East should be our focus now.

Where should we begin? So far, President Obama has been unwilling to take any practical steps to facilitate the overthrow of Iran's key client, the Assad regime in Syria. This needs to change. Also, more generally, the U.S. should consider how to work with its friends in the region to limit Iranian influence in Iraq, Gaza, the Gulf, the West Bank, and Lebanon. We also need to focus on how we might keep Saudi Arabia and others from developing nuclear options of their own. On this point, we need to make it clear to the mullahs that the costs of violating the NPT by acquiring or testing a nuclear device will be much higher than anything they have yet suffered.

Much more, of course, could be attempted. But this much is clear: Obama's 5 percent solution will cease to be dangerous only if

it's rejected by Iran and everyone else. Once that is accomplished, we need to move in a very different direction.

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