



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRAN: THREATENING TO RESTART NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM

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Two senior Iranian officials recently stated publicly that Tehran may restart its nuclear weapons program if the US does not lift sanctions. Both officials suggested for the first time that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's fatwa prohibiting nuclear weapons could be reversed. These comments are aimed at pressuring the US and the three European signatories to the JCPOA – the UK, Germany, and France – to lift sanctions immediately. They may also signal Tehran is ready to abandon the JCPOA and move toward a nuclear weapons breakout capability.

In an extraordinary comment during an 8 February TV interview, Minister of Intelligence Mahmoud Alavi warned Iran might develop nuclear weapons if sanctions are not lifted and the regime feels threatened. Alavi implied that Khamenei's 2003 fatwa against producing, stockpiling and using nuclear weapons could be reversed.

Former diplomat and IRGC general Amir Mousavi also asserted the fatwa could be reversed. On 30 January he stated, "A fatwa ... is issued in accordance with developing circumstances ... if the Americans and Zionists act in a dangerous manner, the fatwa might be changed." Mousavi now directs the Centre for Strategic Studies and International Relations, a Tehran-based IRGC think tank.

The regime has never released the text of the 2003 fatwa but in 2005 an Iranian official read the following at an emergency IAEA meeting: "The Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has issued a fatwa that production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons is prohibited under Islam and that the Islamic Republic shall never acquire these weapons." Khamenei has reiterated the ban on numerous occasions since then.

Meanwhile, Tehran has taken a number of steps since May 2019 in violation of its obligations under the JCPOA that advance its ability to produce a nuclear weapon if they make the political decision to do so. Measures include enriching and stockpiling 20 percent enriched uranium, and spinning advanced centrifuges at both the Fordow and Natanz enrichment facilities. Most recently, Tehran has begun producing uranium metal, a material that can be used to form the core of nuclear weapons.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif cautioned on 11 February that Tehran would take additional measures if the US doesn't lift sanctions by 21 February, the deadline set by parliament. Indeed, Tehran informed the IAEA on 15 February that it will halt implementation of the

Additional Protocol if sanctions are not lifted, a move that would hinder the UN nuclear watchdog's ability to monitor the nuclear program; the IAEA recently found traces of radioactive material at sites where Tehran had blocked inspections.

Earlier on 7 February Khamenei said the US must verifiably lift all sanctions before Iran would reverse these measures and return to compliance with its JCPOA obligations. The Biden administration, however, has indicated it will not lift sanctions until Iran first returns to compliance.

Israeli Military Intelligence released a report on 8 February indicating Iran is probably within two years of producing a nuclear weapon. It noted that Iran is struggling with the development of some critical components needed for a weapon due at least in part to the assassination of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh who reportedly was coordinating all relevant components of building a nuclear weapon. The report did note that Iranian leaders have not yet decided whether to move towards weapons-grade (90%) enrichment. According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinkin, Iran's timeline to obtain sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon has been reduced from about one year to several months.

OUTLOOK

Khamenei can reverse his nuclear fatwa should he deem it necessary; the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued contradictory fatwas on a number of issues. Along with Iran's numerous violations of the JCPOA, Mousavi and Alavi's statements were deliberate and highly provocative, yet another example of Iranian nuclear extortion aimed at pressuring the Biden administration and the E3 to lift sanctions immediately.

While Tehran has repeatedly insisted its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, it had a clandestine weapons program prior to 2003, according to the IAEA and US intelligence. Since then, Tehran has continued to develop key components of a viable weapons program including uranium enrichment and ballistic missiles as a delivery system. Tehran probably has the ability to restart its weapons program if it so chooses, and the comments that the fatwa could be reversed may signal Iran is prepared to abandon the JCPOA and jump start its weapons program if sanctions are not lifted.

The world should not accede to Tehran's nuclear coercion, but insist on a new nuclear deal that places strict and permanent limits on the nuclear program, its ballistic missile arsenal and its support to proxies that are destabilizing the region. Indeed, Tehran should be held to the international "gold standard" which requires it to forego an indigenous uranium enrichment and processing capability to ensure Iran never can build a nuclear weapon.