

Summary of the round table discussion “*Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program*” at the Grand Öztanik Hotel in Istanbul, 15 January 2008

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The roundtable discussion started with two speakers giving short presentations followed by an open discussion. The first speaker started out by emphasizing that a military strike on Iran by the US is highly unlikely at the moment. With the Bush administration under pressure from the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report and ongoing US Presidential election campaigns, attention to the issue and the credibility of the administration are both weak. Given the uncertainty of successful surgical strikes and the lack of willingness to invade another country after Iraq, the US is left with limited options. Moreover, another unilateral attack by the US would damage its already strained relationship with Europe and could lead to the de-facto end of NATO as no European country is ready to support a military strike on Iran. Russia and China would also be strongly opposed to the move.

Taking a more general outlook on the Iranian nuclear program, the speaker stressed the need for a new structure of international relations in the 21st century, in which the “West” can no longer dictate its terms to the rest of the world. Considering a severely damaged NPT regime as a result of a probably inevitable Iranian nuclear bomb in the long term, work should begin on a new nonproliferation regime, which also includes Pakistan and India.

With regard to a new approach, the most important question should be how to get Iran to become a constructive player in the region – not only because of rising oil and gas prices. The speaker described the current pattern of negotiations with Iran as the West asking for something the other side will never be willing to give up. The pattern of negotiations should thus change in a way that takes into consideration Iranian interests in return for an end of Iranian support of Hezbollah and Hamas. A new US President should try to seize his/her window of opportunity and negotiate directly with Iran. At the same time, Iran should be made aware of the principle of massive retaliation by offering NATO Article 5 guarantees to Israel.

The second speaker gave an overview of the German position on Iran. Its nuclear program continues to be a source of concern for Germany after the NIE report. Germany together with the EU-3 wants to continue with negotiations and try to foster a resolution with stronger sanctions at United Nations Security Council. Over the course of several years, the German foreign ministry has tried to offer all kinds of packages to Iran and opened and closed new communication lines with different political factions inside the country to no avail. So far, only sanctions have shown to have an effect on the Iranian government; recently, Iran has given information to the IAEA explicitly to avoid new sanctions. President Ahmadinejad has also come under criticism internally for his rhetoric.

Even though Turkey is not a member of the IAEA board of governors, its voice on the Iranian nuclear program matters: Turkey’s criticism of Iran in 2006 was unwelcome news in Tehran, and since then, there have been a number of official Iranian visits to Ankara, aiming to change Turkey’s stance. President Gul in particular has played an important role as a messenger for the Western (EU-3) position to Iran as foreign minister. Nevertheless, it needs to be taken into account that Turkey is also very dependent on Iranian energy exports, particularly in the winter.

The implications of a nuclear Iran for Turkey

During the debate, a number of participants discussed different scenarios of the Iranian nuclear crisis and their implications for Turkey. One participant pointed out that in the rather unlikely case of a war over the Iranian nuclear program, Iraq is likely to fall apart. Such a development would have dire consequences for Turkey as it would benefit the Iraqi Kurds in their autonomous Northern region. Moreover, a war would increase energy prices and put

Turkey with its current account balance problems into a crisis. Contrary to the current anti-American public opinion in Turkey, an Iran armed with nuclear weapons will not only pose a threat to the US and its allies. Instead, Turkey would become an ordinary state in the region in strategic terms and even more dependent on Western military support and weapon supply. This point was strongly agreed to by at least two other participants who emphasized the gap between Turkish public opinion and the diplomatic efforts of the Turkish political elite and the government. Since 2003 the Turkish government has changed its position and is now following Iran's nuclear research program with concern while Turkish public opinion tends to acknowledge the Iranian right to nuclear weapons.

The participant also elaborated on a possible Turkish nuclear capability as a difficult alternative. Not only does acquiring nuclear weapons take time and money it also requires secrecy which is difficult to manage in an open country like Turkey. Moreover, EU membership would be impossible if the country decides to pursue a nuclear weapons capability. If tougher sanctions were imposed on Iran's energy exports, Turkey's dependency on Russia for oil and gas exports would increase dramatically. Turkey should ask for exemptions from a tough sanctions regime, given its economic losses from recent wars in the region. The best scenario for Turkey, according to one participant, would be a limited agreement between the US and Iran including a security guarantees for Iran and a limited right to develop nuclear energy in return for an end of support of terrorism. Turkey might play a valuable role in such an agreement if it acted as a quiet messenger and if its politicians do not overstate their importance in negotiations publicly.

Almost all participants who commented on the implications of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability for Turkey stressed that Turkey should be very concerned about the current developments in Iran.

Why does Iran want the bomb?

The participants offered very different perspectives on the question of the Iranian intentions for developing a nuclear weapons capability. A number of participants characterized the Iranian intentions as being of an entirely defensive nature. According to them, the main reason for an Iranian nuclear weapons program is as a defense against the Israeli nuclear weapons program and the US military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Another participant saw the new US National Security Strategy of 2002 with its doctrine of preemption and its renewed emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons as another factor. This strategy in combination with the Manichaean world view of the Bush administration would pressure Iran into its defensive nuclear posture.

Others strongly disagreed with the latter assessment pointing to the long history of the Iranian nuclear program. Iran is not interested in deterrence, but in regional dominance. According to them, the Iranian regime has understood that having nuclear weapons fosters its dominance in the region. Another participant gave a detailed account of the scale and history of the Russo-Iranian nuclear cooperation. Since 1995, at least 200 Iranian scientists have obtained a PhD from Russian universities in a field relevant to the Iranian nuclear program, and Iran has not reported its activities to the IAEA for more than 18 years in clear violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which prohibits even the intention of producing nuclear weapons. In addition, the recent US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran (NIE) says with high confidence that Iran has the capacity to produce nuclear weapons if the regime decides to do so. Iran, however, has a long term plan for nuclear weapons and is trying to get third world countries to support their weapons program by promising access to nuclear technology in the future.

In contrast to the focus on Iran, one participant saw the cause of the problem in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Accordingly, the most important driver for Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism was rooted in Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon, which led to the

creation Hezbollah and in its financial support for Hamas as an opponent of the PLO in its early years. The West should not apply double standards to Iran. However, the assessment that Israel is the root of all problems was not shared by a number of participants. One participant stated that the present regime in Iran provides much more cause for concern: their rhetoric and state ideology should be taken very seriously. Even Arab governments see an Iranian nuclear weapons program as more threatening than an Israeli one. The fact that Arab countries have only recently contemplated nuclear programs—although Israel has long had a nuclear weapons capability—serves as evidence for this assessment.

The international nonproliferation regime

The notion of Western double standards was most discussed in the context of the nonproliferation regime. Several participants responded to the first speaker's emphasis on the necessity of a new structure of international relations and to the need for a new NPT by stressing that in the current regime double standards are the norm. According to one participant, denying one country the right to nuclear weapons without universal disarmament is hypocritical. Others pointed to the need to address not only Iran but also other cases of nuclear proliferation within and outside of the NPT. Every country should have the right and the guaranteed access to nuclear energy technology. The Iranian nuclear issue is a political rather than a proliferation issue since the conflict centers much more on nuclear weapons in the hands of a regime like the Iranian one. According to this view, the different threat perceptions in the US and Iran are the main problem which will not be solved by security guarantees alone.

A number of participants strongly disagreed with the assessment that the NPT is a tool of the past and an expression of Western double standards. One participant emphasized that 189 out of a 192 United Nations members have signed the NPT and 184 have renounced nuclear weapons. Since so many sovereign countries have decided that it is in their national interest not to produce nuclear weapons makes the NPT a treaty of the entire international community. Moreover, why would states comply with complicated export controls, become members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and entertain nonproliferation departments in their foreign ministries if this issue was not of importance to them. The NPT is the most successful multilateral arms control treaty. If this instrument lost its legitimacy and was abandoned, the whole multilateral arms control system is in danger. Another participant shared this assessment in describing the NPT as a cornerstone of the multilateral order. Even though it needs reform, it should not be given up entirely. To resolve the issues with the current nonproliferation regime, the "have-nots" must stick to their obligations under the NPT, and the "haves" must start giving up nuclear weapons.

Deterrence or a nuclear weapons free zone?

Another theme discussed during the debate was whether nuclear deterrence can work in the region. To some participants, including the first speaker, the Iranian nuclear program and its implications for the region Middle East must not necessarily be a paramount concern. According to this view, nuclear weapons proliferation has taken place without a nuclear war in other regions and during the Cold War. One participant added that the US presents a greater danger than the Iranian nuclear program due to its invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Others strongly disagreed with these statements: with regard to nuclear deterrence, Israel is in a dangerous situation of not having a second-strike capability since one nuclear attack could wipe out its entire territory. Israel knows that it would have to destroy its enemies with nuclear weapons capabilities early in a possible conflict. However, Iran's knowledge of Israel's position could lead it to strike first.

Moreover, one will never be able to know whether deterrence worked in the Cold War or if we just lucked out. The participant added that a vital component of successful nuclear deterrence—mutual recognition—is missing since many Arab states do not recognize Israel diplomatically. Therefore, a nuclear arms race in this fragile region could result in the nuclear

taboo being broken. Another participant agreed, emphasizing the dangerous mix radical and messianic ideology at play within the Iranian regime. To display a relaxed attitude toward a government which threatened to wipe another country off the map would be absolutely unacceptable.

The majority of participants believed that a nuclear weapons free zone would be the only solution to the current crisis. Not only should Turkey send back the US nuclear weapons on its soil, but Israel should also start to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. Otherwise, Arab states such as Egypt would seek to develop a nuclear weapons capability like Iran. Others added that in addition to nuclear disarmament, Southwest Asia needed mutual recognition in the form of a Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) process and two-level negotiations on all the different regional issues.

One participant believed that a request that Israel give up its nuclear weapons would be immoral and unwise. It would be immoral due to the historic circumstances and unwise because the participant believed there would be more wars in the region, if Israel did not have nuclear weapons. Israel should acknowledge its nuclear weapons, open up to international monitoring and as a good-will gesture, disarm half of its stockpile. Western aid could be used as a conditionality to achieve this goal.

What can be done?

On the issue of how to address the Iranian nuclear program, the participants appeared to be split. Some pointed to the poor record of sanctions in achieving policy objectives over the last 70 years citing Cuba and North Korea as examples. In addition, an oil embargo on Iran would hurt the West more than Iran. The US should try to strike a bargain rather than increase the pressure. Other participants disagreed about the effectiveness of economic and targeted sanctions. Iran is vulnerable to sanctions on technical supply and know-how in the gas and oil industries. Thus it would be a risky strategy for the regime internally to accept economic isolation.

At least two participants stressed the need for an active and united effort on the Iranian nuclear program. Not only is the security of Israel at stake, but also the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council, if Iran develops a nuclear weapons capability in defiance of three sanctions resolutions. Moreover, if the transatlantic community does not offer a better option to deal with the problem, the urge for some in the US and Israel to solve the problem militarily would increase. In order to get negotiations with Iran on track again, the US should take the lead in encouraging Iran to become a respected factor for stability in the region. This would include security guarantees, a nonaggression pact which requires Iran to give up its support for terrorism, economic cooperation through measures like a World Trade Organization membership, and access for Iran to international monitored enrichment facilities. However, a number of participants emphasized the need for a new pattern of negotiations between the West and Iran. Due to the mutual mistrust between the negotiation parties, confidence building measures are needed to overcome decades of confrontation. Iran should be given economic incentives to cover its sunk costs if it decides to give up its nuclear program. Another participant stressed that the main emphasis of any negotiation should be how to get Iran to become a constructive player in the region. Rather than trying to reconstruct the past, Europe should begin to embrace a new world order as its population is declining in the long run.

One participant emphasized the need to convince the Iranian government that they would hurt their national interest by pursuing a nuclear weapons program as the debate's common denominator. The challenge would be to convince them of a better route to achieve their goal of becoming a regional power broker.

Summary

The Istanbul debate on dealing with the Iranian nuclear program offered a view into the positions of Turkey as one of Iran's neighbors during a challenging political period for the country. Iran is not on top of the current Turkish policy agenda as the internal and EU-related issues are of bigger concern. With regard to the Iranian nuclear program, there seemed to be a disconnect between those who view it as a threat to Turkey's national security and those who rather emphasize Western double standards and the flaws of the nonproliferation regime. The latter appear to view an Iranian nuclear weapons capability rather as a Western problem than a challenge to the international community. The common perception that nuclear deterrence can work in a region like the Middle East presents a wake-up call to those who are trying to prevent complacency in regional nuclear nonproliferation activities. Moreover, the fact that accusations of Western Orientalism towards Iran were voiced during the debate points to the fact that more needs to be done to engage Muslim countries in the debate about Iran's nuclear program.