

Iran Fights For Right To Nuclear Technology

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The years-long battle being waged by the Islamic Republic of Iran, for the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, came to a head in mid-June, during a meeting of the board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. What was at stake, was not only Iran's nuclear program, but, by extension, the right of all nations in the developing sector to have access to such technologies.

The ostensible "issue" raised at the IAEA Board of Directors meeting was that of uranium enrichment. The United States has been exerting pressure on Iran, through Russia, which is completing the Iranian Bushehr nuclear plant, as well as through Europe. Claiming that Iran's nuclear program is a cover for a nuclear weapons program, hardliners like Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton have attempted to break up Russia's agreement with Iran, to complete the current plant, and continue building several more. Similar pressure came down on the three European governments—Great Britain, France, and Germany—which had succeeded in mediating an agreement with Tehran last Autumn to sign an additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

At that time, a similar fight was brewing in the IAEA, again ignited by the United States through Bolton. The IAEA had issued an ultimatum to Iran during its September meeting, that it "prove" that its nuclear program had nothing to do with weapons development. The three European foreign ministers, who had sent a letter to Iran urging cooperation with the agency, had been invited to visit Tehran for talks. Those talks took place, and on Oct. 21, a final, joint declaration—known as the Tehran Declaration—was issued. The Iranian government stated that nuclear weapons had no place in its program, that it would respect the NPT and sign an additional protocol, allowing for intrusive IAEA inspections. In exchange, Iran was promised access to modern technologies, including in the nuclear area, and European cooperation to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the region.

Europe and IAEA Have Shifted Position

Now, under renewed pressure from Washington, the three European governments which had engineered the breakthrough, and thereby torpedoed any plan to sanction Iran, seem to have shifted gears. They presented a resolution to the June IAEA meeting, which was adopted, proposing that Iran avoid development of any of the whole range of nuclear fuel

technologies. Their argument was that such enrichment facilities could be used to produce not only the 35% level of enrichment of natural uranium required for fuelling commercial nuclear reactors, but also weapons-grade enriched uranium.

Iran rejected this ultimatum and on June 24, announced it would resume the uranium enrichment it had voluntarily abandoned last year.

Iranian as well as European sources have told this author that the impetus for a condemnation of Iran's program originated in Anglo-American circles. It was President George W. Bush who recently issued the guidelines for this approach, by stating that no country should be allowed to enrich uranium even to the low level required for fuel for nuclear electric power plants, unless it is already in the U.S.-dominated "Nuclear Suppliers Group," which primarily consists of the United States, Russia, and many European countries. All other nations, according to the Bush Administration's new strategy, should be allowed only to purchase power plant fuel from these "supplier" countries.

In addition, the IAEA itself under Director Mohamed ELBaradei has changed its long-standing approach of nuclear technology development under NPT inspections, to one of technological apartheid against non-nuclear powers, of which Iran is being made one example. Speaking to the June 21 Carnegie Endowment meeting in Washington on nuclear non-proliferation, for example, ELBaradei mooted formal adoption of such a new international policy, backed up by "adequate force" provided by the UN Security Council—the Bush White House demand. ELBaradei spoke of placing the production, reprocessing, and enrichment of nuclear fuel entirely under international control; eliminating the use of highly-enriched uranium (HEU) in nuclear power programs; and eliminating weapons-use material (HEU and plutonium) worldwide.

Other Non-Nuclear Nations React

If fuel production is to be denied Iran, then all other nations in the developing sector can expect to see their nuclear energy ambitions curtailed as well. At the IAEA meeting, when the issue was raised, Malaysian IAEA Ambassador Haniff Hussein warned that this could set a precedent for "questioning the inalienable rights of developing countries for access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology." Among these countries, Brazil has come under massive pressure to shut down its indigenously developed enrichment technology. It has refused to allow IAEA inspectors to examine the process, and asserted its sovereign right to develop nuclear energy technology.

The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which was holding its 31st conference at the foreign ministers level in Istanbul that week, issued a final statement declaring full solidarity with Iran on the nuclear question. The resolution stressed the right of all OIC members to peaceful use of nuclear energy, and praised Iran for having signed the addi-



The October 2003 agreement between Iran's Dr. Hasan Rohani (left), IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei (right) and European leaders, now looks like a thing of the past. IAEA decisions on June 16 told Iran it should develop no nuclear technologies except those it might be given by European countries; rejecting this, Iran has announced resumption of construction of a uranium enrichment facility.

tional protocol.

Iran had shut down its enrichment facilities as a gesture of good will towards the IAEA, but had reiterated its intention to continue enrichment. Dr. ElBaradei said, during the Vienna meeting, that the open issues the IAEA has with Iran, over whether it has declared and shut down all of its uranium enrichment facilities, should be brought to a close "within the next few months," but refused to set a deadline. He also said that it was "premature" to conclude Iran was pursuing a military nuclear program.

The resolution presented to the IAEA, in several drafts, expressed "concern" and "serious concern" about Iran's alleged reluctance to fully cooperate with IAEA inspections. One draft said it "deplored" Iran's alleged lack of cooperation. Due to the opposition of Iran and several other developing sector nations to this harsh language, certain changes were made. For example, a new clause was inserted, "recognizing the inalienable right of states" to develop the technology. And, the word "voluntarily" was inserted in a clause which called on Iran to reconsider testing a uranium conversion plant and the construction of a heavy water research reactor. These two projects, at Isfahan and Arak, respectively, are also being challenged, as possibly related to weapons.

The resolution was adopted unanimously by the IAEA's 35-nation board of governors on June 18. The final draft called for speeding up the IAEA's 15-month-old investigation into Iran's nuclear activities, and urged Tehran to enhance cooperation so as to complete the process within a few months. The resolution repeats a call by ElBaradei "that it is essential for

the integrity and credibility of the inspection process to bring these issues to a close within the next few months." And it "deplores . . . that overall, as indicated by the Director General's written and oral reports, Iran's cooperation has not been as full, timely, and proactive as it should have been."

The chief Iranian delegate to the IAEA, Seyed Hossein Mussavian, had said in the days before the vote that the Islamic Republic would continue to cooperate with the IAEA. But Iranian foreign ministry official Amir Hossein Zamaninia characterized the resolution as "a major departure from the reality on the ground." He said Iran would decide whether to continue voluntary measures, which go beyond the nuclear NPT, according to "the degree of implementation of the reciprocal commitments." This refers to the promises made by the Europeans, of access to technologies.

The American position, as stated by State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, was that "it's important for the IAEA to continue its pressure on Iran, to continue its investigation, its inspections, to continue finding things out about this program." Boucher added new accusations to the list, saying Iran was trying to conceal sensitive activities, even razing nuclear sites to hide banned nuclear activity. He claimed there were commercial satellite photographs proving his case.

Iran Draws the Line

The Iranian government has categorically rejected all such claims, and correctly identified the source of the pressure in Washington. Following statements by Foreign Minister Dr.

Kamal Kharrazi on June 12, Iranian President Khatami made public a letter he had sent to the three European heads of state. In it, Khatami “warned that the continuation of such behavior, engendered by U.S. pressure, will seriously damage Iran-EU mutual confidence and Iran’s cooperation with the international community for the peaceful use of nuclear energy,” the Mehr News Agency reported. Referring to the Oct. 21, 2003 Tehran agreement between Iran and the three EU governments, “Khatami warned that Iran would not forgo its inalienable right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, adding that if such confrontational behavior continues and they continue to ignore their commitments, Iran will contemplate other alternatives.”

As the haggling at the IAEA continued, Khatami again addressed the issue, telling the press on June 16 that the European-Iranian agreement last Autumn had been a two-way deal. “We complied,” he said, “with the terms of the protocol as an example of good understanding and suspended the process of uranium enrichment voluntarily.” He went on to declare that “Despite the fact that the EU trio had undertaken to facilitate transfer of nuclear technology to Iran and cooperate closely at regional and bilateral levels, they have not kept with their pledges on various pretexts.”

The spokesman for the Iranian delegation to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting in Vienna, Hossein Musavian, expressed Iran’s protest against the draft resolution presented by the Europeans. He reiterated that Iran would not make any concessions regarding the Uranium Conversion Facility in Isfahan, or the heavy water installations in Arak.

One curious incident at the IAEA meeting on June 17, appeared to shift momentum towards the Iranian side in the conflict. It emerged that an IAEA June 1 report, accusing Iran of wrong-doing, was false. The report said that Iran had not declared until April that it had imported certain parts needed for advanced P-2 centrifuges used to purify uranium for use in atomic power plants or weapons. It turned out that Iran had informed the IAEA as early as January; at the IAEA meeting, Iran presented a tape recording to prove the case. The IAEA had to admit its error. The incident showed that the case against Iran is full of holes.

The Iranian government is eager to settle the nuclear energy issue once and for all, before it hands over the reins of power to a new conservative government. Following the recent elections, a conservative majority took over Iran’s parliament. It is now this parliament which is to draft plans for cooperation with the IAEA, and which must ratify any agreements with the body. If the IAEA adopts a hard line, it could lead to a reaction on the part of the new majority, to break off cooperation completely, as Khatami hinted. The person in Tehran who negotiated the breakthrough with Britain, France, and Germany in October was Hjatoleslam Hassan Rowhani, Secretary of the Supreme Security Council, and a prominent representative of the conservative faction. Rowhani had been assigned to lead the talks by the

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Thus, if the IAEA reneges on its agreements, it will be viewed as an attack against this political faction as well.

The renewed attacks against Iran’s nuclear program come in the context of a campaign to discredit the Iranian government, regarding an issue which has nothing ostensibly to do with nuclear power. Rather, it has to do with Iran’s vigorous diplomatic activity over the past months, aimed at improving security and contributing to regional stability, around the enflamed Iraq crisis. With its historical relations to Iraq, especially through the Shi’ite religious establishment, Iran has been in a privileged position to influence the course of events there. This has not only not been welcomed by Washington, but has been aggressively countered. First came the scandal surrounding former Iraqi Governing Council member Ahmed Chalabi, accused of passing sensitive U.S. intelligence to Iranian contacts; then came the flare-up over Iran’s nuclear energy program.

If U.S. and U.K. pressures push the IAEA and Europeans to further provocations, this could produce a most unpleasant response. High-level political representatives, as well as the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei, have made a major issue of the nuclear program in recent speeches. Their position is that Iran has a right to the technology, and will never relinquish it.

Three British Boats

Just days after the IAEA vote, three British vessels were seized by Iran, and their eight crew members arrested. Iranian al-Alam TV reported on June 20, “The crew have confessed to having entered Iranian waters,” specifying that “The vessels were 1,000 meters inside Iranian territorial waters.”

A British Ministry of Defence spokesman said the boats were being used to train the Iraqi river patrol service, and may have strayed across the maritime border by mistake. According to Iranian television, weapons and maps were confiscated from the men after they were apprehended. Deputy Head of Joint Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces for Cultural and Defense Affairs, Col. Ali Reza Afshar, told IRNA that the detainees were heavily armed and carrying light and semi-heavy automatic weapons, detailed area maps, and logistic and identification equipment.

The men were interrogated for days, and paraded before television camera, blindfolded, while British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw contacted his Iranian counterpart Dr. Kamal Kharrazi to work out terms of a release. On June 24, the men were released, after Iran said it had determined that the incident had not been hostile.

The incident was timely for Iran, which used it to show resistance to anything it considers infringing on its national sovereignty—be it a violation of territorial waters, or withholding of modern technologies. One thing is certain: Iran will not give up its right to nuclear energy.