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Verifying Iran's Nuclear Compliance

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Verifying any potential agreement to prevent Iran from clandestinely developing a nuclear weapons capability and to limit its ability to use its permitted nuclear infrastructure to quickly build an operational nuclear weapon will be exceptionally challenging.

Iran has a demonstrated record of violating safeguard agreements with the IAEA. The lack of transparency into their nuclear program was cited and documented by the IAEA in numerous reports from the Director General to the Board of Directors. Iran was negligent in declaring the Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz in 2002 and the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant in 2009. In fact, Iran acknowledged both facilities only after they were exposed by an opposition group and reported in the press.

The IAEA Director General report of 8 November 2011 provided disturbing details regarding Iran's nuclear warhead development efforts that would allow Iran to acquire the expertise necessary to produce nuclear weapons. Although there was previous IAEA reporting on "weaponization", this report was stark in its concern about the military dimension of Iran's nuclear program.

Recent IAEA reports have noted that ongoing negotiations with Iran produced a "framework for cooperation" that, inter alia, resulted in an agreement between the IAEA and Iran on cooperative measures for the IAEA to conduct verification activities in line with resolving past and present issues. While previous arrangement and promises by Iran to come clean on its nuclear activities have not been implemented, there does appear to be at least the appearance of cooperation. For example, these reports also confirmed that Iran down-blended and converted to uranium oxide their inventory of 20% purity uranium.

Director General Amano on 2 June 2014 said the IAEA needed time before they could provide credible assurance of the absence of undeclared nuclear material in Iran.

A robust monitoring and verification protocol will be necessary to deal with Iran's nuclear program. This will be a very difficult program to implement effectively. At a minimum it will require unfettered access to people and places. Indeed, if Iran were in compliance with the six UN Security Council resolutions, all forbidding Iran from enriching uranium, the monitoring and verification process would be easier.

Since Iran reportedly will now be permitted to enrich uranium at some level, the IAEA's task will be considerably more difficult. Some of the monitoring issues are:

a. An accurate baseline of Iran's nuclear program is necessary for any meaningful monitoring program that will attempt to verify compliance with a safeguard agreement. Iran has declared 17 nuclear facilities at 9 locations. Is this the totality of their program? As stated above, the IAEA cannot provide credible assurance of the absence of undeclared nuclear material in Iran. Assurances that there are no covert nuclear facilities in Iran capable of enriching uranium are necessary. Technically, locating covert uranium enrichment facilities is difficult, since spinning centrifuges are silent, with no signal or signature. Our experience with North Korea strongly reinforces this point.

b. Iran announced its intent to construct 10 additional uranium enrichment facilities and to build a greater number (ca 60,000) of sophisticated centrifuges. Again, monitoring the declared facilities deploying sophisticated centrifuges with greater capacity and confirming the non-existence of additional covert facilities will be a real challenge.

c. A comprehensive declaration from Iran on their nuclear program is a necessary first step for any monitoring and verification program. In addition to the facilities, a list of the scientists and technicians who are working at these facilities is necessary. IAEA monitors will require access to these individuals and to their relevant records and notes.

d. The right to take samples at every facility is necessary, with said sample undergoing testing at U.S. or IAEA labs.

e. The issue of weaponization must be pursued, with access to known and suspected high explosive test sites, and all relevant records. Information dealing with miniaturization and the mating of a nuclear warhead to an Iranian missile must be pursued, for obvious reasons.

f. Access to all related nuclear R&D work and sites will be necessary, with "any time, any place" s access to the facilities that manufacture, assemble and test centrifuges.

g. Technical coverage of Natanz and Fordow, with cameras, sensors and inspections, will be necessary, on a 24/7 basis.

h. Technical monitoring of Arak, Iran's plutonium facility approaching completion, will be required since this facility has one purpose: using plutonium for nuclear weapons. If Iran is committed to a peaceful nuclear program, Arak should be dismantled, not monitored.

These are some of the issues that a monitoring and verification protocol will have to address. The task will be massive, especially if Iran is permitted to construct additional fuel enrichment plans, similar to Natanz and Fordow, deploying improved centrifuges with greater capacity. Determining that permitted enrichment does not exceed the 5% low enriched uranium level will also be a challenge, if Iran is permitted to enrich uranium at numerous facilities. Indeed, determining that there are no covert uranium enrichment facilities will be a principal challenge.