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Iran Sends Mixed Signals on Nuclear Program

Speaking two days before Iran is scheduled to meet the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany in Geneva to discuss its nuclear fuel enrichment program, Ali Akbar Salehi — the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization — said on September 29 that Iran will never abandon its program.



According to a VOA News report, Iranian lawmakers are warning the United States and other Western powers against repeating past mistakes during the October 1 Geneva talks, saying that the talks are an “historic opportunity” to settle the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

On September 28, Salehi said on state-run Press TV that Iran will soon tell the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when it can inspect the Islamic republic's new uranium enrichment facility, located near the city of Qom. The IAEA reported that Iran had disclosed the existence of the plant to IAEA Director-General Mohamed El Baradei on September 21. Salehi stated that Iran has informed IAEA that its new plant will produce enriched uranium at the five-percent level of U-235 consistent with its nuclear energy program to produce fuel. (Highly enriched uranium is considered weapons-grade when it has been enriched to about 90 percent U-235.)

The controversy over Iran's new nuclear fuel plant comes close in time to the Islamic nation's test firings on September 27-28 of several missiles, including two long-range missiles capable of reaching targets 800 to 1,240 miles distant. Iran described the launches as routine military exercises, but France and the United States called them “destabilizing” and “provocative.” Some observers believe the timing of the tests was designed to send a message to Western powers pressuring Iran concerning its uranium enrichment program.

CNN reported that Salehi, speaking on Press TV, accused the major powers of politicizing the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities, calling their charges that the newly revealed uranium enrichment plant can be used for military purposes “baseless.”

“It is against our tenets, it is against our religion to produce, use, hold or have nuclear weapons or arsenal,” said Salehi. “How can we more clearly state our position? Since 1974 we have been saying this.”

Salehi told the state-sponsored TV station that Iran will try to resolve the issue “both politically and technically” during the October 1 meetings in Geneva.

Though Salehi has indicated Iran's willingness to talk with the Western powers, Reuters news reported that a hardline member of parliament, Mohammad Karamirad — a member of parliament's Foreign Affairs and National Security commission — was quoted by IRNA (the official Islamic Republic News Agency): “If the Zionists and America continue their pressure on Iran and if the talks with (six powers)



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do not reach a conclusion, then parliament will take a clear and transparent position, such as Iran's withdrawal from the NPT [the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty]."

Although Iran's parliament has the authority to order the nation's withdrawal from the NPT, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has ultimate authority on matters of state.

Karamirad's statement also contradicts Salehi's September 29 statement to reporters: "We are acting in the framework of the NPT. We are committed to our commitments."

The fate of the dispute should be made more apparent following the October 1 Geneva talks, where Iran will be represented by its nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, and the U.S. delegation will be led by William Burns, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. AP cited a U.S. official who said on September 29 that Iran will be expected to make clear in Geneva whether it is serious about cooperating on the nuclear issue. The United States is expected to push for increased economic sanctions against Iran if the Middle Eastern country does not make a satisfactory account of its nuclear program.

The AP report noted that an important factor is whether Russia and China, who have veto power as permanent members of the UN Security Council, would go along with new sanctions and quoted Kurt Campbell, the State Department's top Asia policy official. Campbell said on September 28 that when U.S. and Chinese officials discussed the matter at last week's G-20 summit meeting in Pittsburgh, the Chinese had asked for further details on the U.S. assessment of Iran's nuclear program, including U.S. views about China's role in reaching a settlement.

"China has broad and diverse interests, like any great power," said Campbell. "And it faces now a situation in which it has several powers on its border that face specific challenges," including North Korea's nuclear activities, nuclear-armed Pakistan's insurgency, "and now a series of challenges near its territory from Iran. It's very important for China that this issue be resolved peacefully, but also that it be resolved."

There is a certain irony in the United States consulting with China in an attempt to enlist the latter's support to quell Iran's uranium enrichment program.

In the first place, Iran has not been proven to have the capability to enrich a sufficient supply of uranium to a sufficient degree to manufacture even one crude nuclear weapon. And even if it managed to do so, there is the challenge of delivery. While the recently tested Iranian missiles have the range to reach all of the Middle East and parts of Southeastern Europe, they have not been proven to have the accuracy needed to strike their intended targets. Furthermore, launching one or two nuclear-armed missiles would be a suicidal exercise for the Iranians, since they lack the defensive capabilities to prevent retaliatory annihilation by a number of nations, including Israel, which the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Federation of American Scientists believe possesses as many as 75-200 nuclear weapons.

Then there is the matter of China itself. Aside from being one of the most repressive regimes on Earth, despite having supported the military aggression of communist regimes such as North Korea and Vietnam in wars against U.S. forces, and despite having been a major source of material for terrorist organizations worldwide, the United States has not called for economic sanctions against China! To the contrary, in 2008 the United States imported \$337 billion worth of goods from China, while exporting only \$69 billion, for a trade deficit of \$268 billion.

The question remains: Why is China, an oppressive communist regime that is estimated to have murdered as many as 60 million of its own citizens since coming to power 50 years ago, and which is



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estimated to possess anywhere from 100 to 400 nuclear warheads, rewarded with such generous trade terms, while Iran is threatened with harsh sanctions for manufacturing materials which conceivably might be used to make a single nuclear weapon, if that?

Photo of Ali Akbar Salehi: AP Images



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