



Iran: Much More Than Nukes

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Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey's acknowledgment this week that Iran "is a threat to U.S. national security in many ways," and not just in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, is both welcome and timely.

In highlighting Iran's nuclear pursuit, U.S. policymakers and pundits have cast insufficient light on Tehran's other activities in the region and beyond that dog U.S. security interests and make its potential nuclear capacity so frightening.

Those activities include Tehran's efforts to achieve regional hegemony (and drive the U.S. from the region), to de-stabilize Sunni-dominated Islamic states across the Middle East, to finance and arm Hezbollah and other groups in its long-time role as the world's most aggressive state sponsor of terrorism, to weaken if not destroy Israel, to launch cyber warfare against both Washington and Jerusalem, and to expand its beachhead south of America's border.

Indeed, Dempsey's statement to the Senate Appropriations Defense Subcommittee comes as Iran is edging closer to a nuclear breakout and, in collaboration with Hezbollah (and with Russia's help), is tipping the proxy war that Syria has become toward Bashar al-Assad's survival and, consequently, America's defeat.

On the nuclear front, Tehran is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy toward the technology and know-how of nuclear weaponry while, for the moment, remaining below the "red line" that Jerusalem has warned would trigger an Israeli military response to prevent Iran from going nuclear.

Specifically, Iranian officials announced over the weekend that Iran installed a reactor vessel at its heavy water reactor in Arak that could enable it to reprocess plutonium for a nuclear weapon. Iran also told the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, that its Arak facility will become operational in late 2014.

Meanwhile, the IAEA said in late May that Iran has installed almost 700 advanced centrifuges at its uranium enrichment site in Natanz, compared to just 180 in February, and it plans to install 3,000 in total.

Thus, with technological improvements at Arak and Natanz, Iran is making progress on uranium as well as plutonium enrichment - both of which are paths to highly enriched fuel for nuclear weapons.

The uranium path is creating more urgency at the moment, with Israeli Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz telling the Foreign Press Association that Iran has 190 kilos of fuel enriched to 20 percent and that, once it has about 250 kilos, it can move within weeks to enrich its stockpile to the weapons-grade 90 percent level.

Also, as the Middle East Media Research Institute, or MEMRI, wrote this week, Iran has used its recent talks with the five permanent U.N. Security Council members and Germany over its nuclear program to make further progress on that very program.

"Iran is turning these talks into a tool that serves its own interests," MEMRI wrote. "It is complying with the West's demands by holding pointless talks with the 5+1 and the IAEA while avoiding reaching [an] agreement" and refusing to let IAEA inspectors visit another key facility, that one at Parchin.

In a sense, Iran's progress on the nuclear front parallels its progress on the battlefield and, in turn, its growing influence in the region. With the assistance of about 5,000 Hezbollah fighters as well as fighters from its own elite Al-Quds force, Iran is playing a major role in shifting momentum in Syria's brutal civil war toward the defiant Assad, making his survival more likely.

The strongman's fate has enormous long-term implications for the region and, in particular, for Iran and the United States. With Iran sending arms and fighters to Syria and the U.S. pursuing diplomacy to achieve Assad's departure, Tehran and Washington are essentially fighting a proxy war in Syria.

"This is an Iranian fight," the Gulf Research Council's Mustafa Alani told the Washington Post. "It is no longer a Syrian one. The issue is hegemony in the region... If Iran wins this conflict and the Syrian regime survives, Iran's interventionist policy will become wider and its credibility will be enhanced.

Iran's gain is America's loss, as Martin Indyk, the former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, explained to The Times of Israel. "The essence of the conflict," he said, "is that any victory for Iran and Assad is a defeat for those who aspire to a more liberal reality [in Syria] that is backed by the United States."

Thus, while nothing is inevitable, Iran is on its way to a victory that will enhance its prestige and broaden its aspirations, while the U.S. is headed for a defeat that will greatly damage its regional credibility.

Tehran is doing all that -- and lots more in the region and beyond -- without nuclear weaponry. That's what makes a nuclear Iran, and the protection it could give itself and its terrorist clients, so potentially dangerous.

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