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Opening the Door to a Solution with Iran

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The recent nuclear talks with Iran in Istanbul represent a significant gain for the United States. These talks have established a step-by-step, or action-for-action, process to prevent Iran increasing its nuclear weapons capabilities and create confidence that Iran is not on a quest for nuclear weapons. However, success is by no means assured.

An Iranian decision to address at least part of the evidence about its past military nuclear programs is necessary to build confidence at this critical, initial stage that this difficult negotiating process has a chance of achieving its ultimate goal. It would be imprudent to assume Iran is acting in good faith about the rest of its nuclear programs without addressing those past activities which are at the heart of the dispute between Iran and the international community over whether or not it intends to build nuclear weapons. Only by understanding Iran's past military nuclear activities can confidence develop that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons today. Recent evidence about Iran's past military nuclear activities at the Physics Research Center (PHRC) provides an opportunity to start dealing with this difficult issue.

Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have scheduled additional talks in Vienna on May 14-15 aimed at resolving the IAEA's concerns about Iran's past and possibly on-going efforts to make nuclear weapons. One way to increase the chances that these talks succeed, unlike the two previous rounds, is for Iran to demonstrate a new openness about discussing the PHRC's activities in the 1990s. Iran should take the opportunity of the May meeting to commit to providing both a revised declaration about the PHRC and access to its former members.

Raised Expectations

The success of the Istanbul talks has raised expectations that in the next meeting at the end of May in Baghdad the United States can at least lay the basis for an agreement where Iran would halt its most threatening uranium enrichment activities. The priority is stopping the further production of 20 percent enriched uranium, removing stocks of enriched uranium, and freezing activities at the deeply buried Fordow enrichment plant, including the installation of any more centrifuges at this site and Natanz. Achieving these steps would make it more time consuming at least during the next year for Iran to make weapon-grade uranium for nuclear weapons, the most important and difficult part of Iran making a nuclear weapon.

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But many believe that Iran does not intend to make any real concessions and is using the negotiations as a ploy to buy time for the further development of its ability to rapidly make weapon-grade uranium and nuclear weapons. Underlying this suspicion is the central uncertainty of whether Iran wants to acquire nuclear weapons.

It is imperative Iran concretely signal its commitment not to build nuclear weapons. The most straightforward way for Iran to show such a commitment is to cooperate with the IAEA. It wants Iran to address a range of evidence about the past and possibly on-going military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program. The evidence points to both a parallel military nuclear program and programs to develop the nuclear weapon itself, often called nuclear weaponization. Given that Iran has resisted cooperation with the IAEA for several years and the evidence has meanwhile increased substantially, this process is likely to be lengthy.

Revealing PHRC

Iran could take a small, but critical step towards demonstrating its intention not to build nuclear weapons by immediately opening up about past military nuclear efforts at the Physics Research Center, which operated from 1989 until at least 1998, when its activities were consolidated into other defense and atomic energy entities. The former head of the PHRC is on a short list of Iranians the IAEA wants to talk to.

Iran has had a civilian nuclear program, administered by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), for decades. The evidence gathered by the IAEA over many years and information obtained recently by ISIS support that the PHRC ran a parallel, secret military nuclear program whose long-term aim was to lay the basis for the development of nuclear weapons. (The ISIS results are in [reports on the ISIS web site](#) and in a [Washington Post article](#).) According to the IAEA's November 2011 Iran safeguards report, this center was created in the late 1980s to organize and administer an undeclared nuclear program under the authority of the Ministry of Defense. ISIS obtained over 1,600 telexes that provide a detailed snapshot of the center's wide-ranging overseas procurement efforts and its focus on acquiring the wherewithal for many aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle. The telexes outline efforts to acquire goods for gas centrifuges, uranium conversion, and heavy water production, computer codes useful to a nuclear weapons program, and scientific and engineering information important to developing the nuclear fuel cycle.

Iran has repeatedly stated that many of the claims of military dimensions to its program are allegations based on forgeries. However, the telexes are hard to dismiss as forgeries. The information in the telexes can be readily checked and assessed openly. To verify their authenticity, ISIS matched a number of telexes to the records of companies that received the telexes or other information that ISIS has collected independently. In the past, the IAEA received a much smaller set of procurement information about the PHRC, which prompted it in 2004— as indicated in the IAEA reports — to raise its first questions on the role of the military in Iran's nuclear program. This larger set confronts Iran with a much more difficult challenge in trying to deny its authenticity or refuse to talk about it.

The PHRC first attracted attention in 2004 when commercial satellite imagery showed the razing of the industrial compound in Lavisan-Shian, in north Tehran that had originally been its headquarters. Looking back, Iran's systemic destruction of this site appears to have been aimed at hiding its military nuclear program.

The role of the PHRC has gained additional importance because the scale of Iran's alleged nuclear weaponization program described by the IAEA is too large to have started in the early 2000s. The PHRC is seen as the most logical candidate for the entity that laid the basis for subsequent nuclear weapons efforts. And the revelation of the secret, deeply buried Qom enrichment site in September 2009 by the United States, Britain and France supports that this site was to be a secret enrichment site dedicated to providing Iran with weapon-

grade uranium for nuclear weapons. Its design was likely pioneered at the PHRC prior to its consolidation into other organizations in the late 1990s or early 2000s.

Iran has steadfastly denied that the PHRC or the Ministry of Defense was in any way involved in nuclear fuel cycle work or has been otherwise engaged in activities related to making nuclear weapons. Iran's has refused to budge one iota in denying any military dimensions of its nuclear program, despite a great deal of evidence that they existed. This intransigence could be partly explained by Iran's unwillingness to come clean about such sensitive activities without incentives from the United States and its allies including security assurances against attack and a clemency for past transgressions in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But neither incentives nor clemency are likely without Iran first demonstrating a clear sign that it intends to come clean about the growing evidence that it has had military nuclear programs, some of which may continue today. Discussing the PHRC forthrightly is a way for Iran to send that signal in these initial negotiations.

Such revelations about the PHRC would not address all the IAEA's concerns. The IAEA has called on Iran to allow a new visit to the Parchin military site to investigate specific evidence that Iran tested key components of nuclear weapons there in the early 2000s. Parchin remains important for the IAEA to visit. However, most of the PHRC issues could be resolved quickly. And their resolution would be an important step in establishing a process to settle the broader military dimensions issues, including Parchin.

Iran's credibility is heavily damaged. Many legitimately doubt Iran's Supreme Leader when he declares that Iran will never seek nuclear weapons. Proof is needed. If Iran does not start providing clarifications about the military dimension of its efforts, it risks poisoning the negotiations with P5+1 and makes military strikes that much more likely. On the other hand, Iran's forthright discussion of the PHRC could dramatically increase confidence in the negotiating process and open the door to a peaceful resolution of this crisis.