



August 20, 2012

Support the Reformist Call for a National Referendum over Iran's Nuclear Program:

An Economically Misguided Nuclear Program is Not Worth the Suffering

By Lyle Bacaltos and Andrea Stricker

On July 10, 2012 Abdollah Nouri, an Iranian reformist politician and cleric, proposed that Iran hold a national referendum that would give the Iranian people the power to decide the future of Iran's nuclear program.¹ He argued that recent economic sanctions against Iran combined with threats of war were starting to have detrimental effects. Publics around the world and in Iran should support Nouri's call, despite the unlikelihood of the Iranian regime holding a referendum that would truly let the people of Iran decide the future of the country's nuclear policy. Nonetheless, an Iranian national debate on the nuclear issue is long overdue, and Nouri's call is a step in the right direction.

The Iranian regime started its centrifuge program, the most sensitive part of the nuclear program, under great secrecy in the mid-1980s, revealing it publicly only in 2003 under intense international pressure. It has hidden the true costs of its centrifuge and associated facilities behind a nationalist smokescreen, preferring to confront the West rather than face the fact that the program is uneconomical and often incompetent. Unless the real reason the regime pursues this program is to build nuclear weapons the centrifuge program serves no worthwhile purpose. The Iranian people should decide if it is worth the costs.

It is also time for reformists and others to stop defending the charade of Iran's "fundamental right" to uranium enrichment. Iran does not have a right to enrich uranium under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the regime falsely claims. The NPT provides a conditional right to nuclear energy, including enrichment, based on the state being in conformity with Articles I and II; the latter prohibits non-nuclear weapon states such as Iran from building nuclear weapons.² The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has stated for years that Iran's compliance with Article II is in doubt. Thus, the IAEA and the U.N. Security Council have judged that they are well within their legal mandate to demand a suspension to Iran's centrifuge program and more transparency over its entire nuclear program, including past and possibly on-going activities related to building nuclear weapons. It is wrong to defend Iran's centrifuge program as a "right." This obvious distortion serves mainly to intensify the suffering of the Iranian people and block any resolution of this controversy with the international community.

¹ "Reformist Challenges Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, July 13, 2012.

² Article IV.1: Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with articles I and II of this Treaty.

Reformists and pragmatists both in Iran and abroad should instead focus on Nouri's argument that the nuclear issue should not be allowed to "threaten all of (Iran's) national interests." The need for all to question the costs and benefits of the Iranian regime's nuclear program is essential.

Established Iranian political figures are increasingly acknowledging the hardship imposed by economic sanctions on Iran. On July 23, Iranian Minister of Industries and Business Mehdi Ghazanfari stated, "The enemy has put his fingers on the main arteries of the country's economy and is now implementing comprehensive sanctions."³ In remarks about recent sanctions approved by the U.S. Congress, the head of Iran's Central Bank, Mahmoud Bahmani, said, "Sanctions mean nothing short of military war, and we need to begin a series of irregular economic war policies."⁴ President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad acknowledged on July 3 that the sanctions imposed on Iran, which are costing Iran around \$48 billion in revenue, or 10 percent of its economy, are "the harshest ever imposed on a country."⁵ Few dispute that the sanctions are taking an increasing toll on the Iranian economy.

Even so Ayatollah Ali Khamenei notably remains obstinate to changing Iran's nuclear policies. In an Iran state television broadcast, he said, "They (the West) explicitly say they need to increase pressures, tighten sanctions to force Iranian authorities to reconsider their calculations. But a look at the facts leads us not only to avoid reconsidering our calculations, but to move on our intended path with greater confidence."⁶ Ayatollah Ahmad Janati, the hardline chief of Iran's influential Guardians Council, said officials under the supervision of the Supreme Leader were tackling the crisis, and he urged national media to avoid "pessimistic" news and instead focus on stories that "make people happy, hopeful and boost their morale."⁷ But why anyone supports such misguided responses in the face of painful sanctions is not evident.

Iran's centrifuge program remains an uneconomical and unnecessary way to produce low enriched uranium for Iran's nuclear reactors or medical needs. For a decade, the regime has squandered huge amounts of funds with the pseudo promise of producing large amounts of low enriched uranium for indigenous commercial nuclear power reactors. It is unlikely to ever realize this objective without the expenditure of even more enormous sums and likely dramatically worsened safety problems in any Iranian domestically produced nuclear power reactors. Now Iran argues it needs to produce enriched uranium for research reactor fuel, but this requirement is actually miniscule and also unnecessary when judged against the massive investment in centrifuges already undertaken. All these costs and risks can be easily avoided by importing both reactors and enriched uranium fuel. Today, Iran would lose nothing by opting to buy enriched uranium or medical isotopes from abroad, unless of course the true aim of the program is to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. In that case, the existing centrifuge program is large enough to produce highly enriched uranium for a small nuclear arsenal.

If nuclear weapons are the true aim of the program Nouri's idea for a national referendum is even more important. The costs of building nuclear weapons will be devastating for Iran, including harsher economic and political sanctions and likely military strikes.

³ Hossein Mohammadi, "Iranian Officials Now Repeatedly Acknowledge: The Sanctions are Devastating," Payvand Iran News, July 23, 2012.

⁴ Mahmoud Bahmani, "Sanctions No Less than Military War: Central Bank Chief," Radio Zamaneh, July 31, 2012.

⁵ Anthony DiPaola, "Iran Loses \$133 Million A Day On Embargo, Buoying Obama" Bloomberg, August 2, 2012.

⁶ Ali Akhbar Dareini, "Iran Sanctions: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Says Sanctions Will Not Alter Nuclear Program," The Associated Press, July 25, 2012.

⁷ Mohammad Davari, "This is War: Iran Feels Impact of Sanctions," *The Daily Star*, August 4, 2012.

There appear to be more and more people in Iran who believe that the country's economic future is not worth the pain of sanctions and the risk of war over the regime's existing nuclear program. Their voices should be encouraged.

For more on Nouri's comments, see excerpts from his presentation published by [The Iran Primer](#).