



The Unpredictability of Iran: To Be Continued?

In the shadow of the Syrian drama, and the still tense, volatile situation in the countries affected by the events of the Arab Spring, lurks another crisis: the policy and actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Facing a stricter regime of political and economic sanctions, and subject to increasing pressure from the international community, the country still consistently fails to allow full and transparent cooperation on its nuclear program.

In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” Senior Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation Mr. Tomasz Otłowski analyses the recent developments in the Iranian crisis. “For the Islamic Republic of Iran the nuclear program has a fundamental and strategic importance. From the perspective of Tehran, possession of nuclear weapons would be a final and total guarantee of immunity from regional and outside enemies and the condition of the survival of the current state and regime. The objective of obtaining nuclear weapons justifies any means and Iran is ready for even the most serious consequences: international condemnation, ostracism from the countries of the region and the West, and even severe sanctions crippling the economy.”

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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In the shadow of the Syrian drama, and the still tense, volatile situation in the countries affected by the events of the Arab Spring, lurks another crisis: the policy and actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Facing a stricter regime of political and economic sanctions, and subject to increasing pressure from the international community, the country still consistently fails to allow full and transparent cooperation on its nuclear program.

The Iranian nuclear program: close to an end?

August 2012 did not just mark the tenth anniversary of the moment the world first learned that Iran had been conducting an advanced nuclear program (and had been doing so for many decades). It was also the tenth anniversary of the unsuccessful efforts of the international community to persuade Tehran to fully cooperate in clarifying any disputes accrued around this program. A decade on and the international community is still in the same place, watching helplessly as the Iranians, systematically and consistently, make incredible progress towards achieving its ultimate geopolitical goal: to possess nuclear weapons.

In recent months, more and more information and data indicate that Tehran is now only one step away from obtaining the technological capacity to construct a prototype of a "nuclear explosive device" – its first primitive atomic bomb. The reports on the Iranian program raise many concerns. Iran is planning to dramatically accelerate the process of uranium enrichment in the largest nuclear facility in Natanz (which serves as a flagship for the entire project), which is done mostly by increasing the number of centrifuges working there. According to reliable reports, there are about ten thousand centrifuges, especially the newest type of IR-4, which is, however, only 20 per cent of the overall production capacity of the facility.

In a uranium enrichment facility in Fordow (near Qum), whose existence was disclosed only in 2009, the aim is also to systematically increase the production capacity of centrifuge cascades. Some sources also show that Iran is moving most of its activities to this center of uranium enrichment. It is no surprise: the Fordow plant, hidden deep in the mountain massif, is an object much more difficult to reach than Natanz in the event of possible destruction by conventional methods. What is important is that it was in Fordow where inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) a few months ago found the traces of uranium enriched by up to 27 per cent. The evidence suggests that there are works conducted in this installation whose scope and nature go beyond the civilian aspects of nuclear power.

Most think-tanks dealing with the Iranian nuclear program estimate that Iran has already amassed 5 to 6 tons of low-enriched uranium (3.5 percent level, i.e. is in the form of uranium hexafluoride, UF₆). This amount of material, if enriched to the "military" level, i.e. about 90 per cent, could be enough to produce 5-6 standard nuclear warheads. In addition, Iran already has about 100-200 kg of uranium enriched to approximately 20 per cent.

The latest report (published in October 2012) by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS, an American think-tank monitoring Iran's nuclear program) brings even more disturbing news. According to ISIS, Iran is still only two months away from producing the so-called significant amount (significant quantity, SQ) of uranium enriched to military values. According to ISIS experts, this is how long it would take to process the current Iranian low-enriched uranium stocks to reach the "military level". ISIS estimated

that about 25 kg of highly enriched uranium is needed for one prototype warhead.

Sanctions: painful, but bearable?

The imminent possibility of Iran achieving a "nuclear breakthrough" gradually increased tensions around the country, putting on the agenda once more the issue of a possible military intervention, aiming to eliminate or delay the Iranian program.

However, a military option may go by the wayside due to information coming from Iran itself, and relating to the socio-economic situation in the country. According to some reports, the Iranian economy is already beginning to feel the effects of recent international sanctions, especially the radical limitations of oil exports – the main source of revenue for Iran. It is estimated that in the summer of 2012 crude oil production decreased as a result of trade restrictions by 1 million barrels per day (down from 3.5 million bbl/d to 2.5 million bbl/d). Unconfirmed reports from sources close to the Iranian opposition even say that in September 2012, Iran exported actually only 1 million bbl/d. This marked decline in revenue adversely affected the liquidity of the state, contributing to the collapse of the exchange rate and rising inflation. Critical here was the last week of September 2012, when the Iranian rial lost its value against the dollar by as much as 40 percent. The collapse of the currency was followed by social unrest and riots, first (early October 2012) with the participation of small currency traders from a Tehran bazaar, and later also included employees of large companies (such as a transport company "Vahed" from Tehran).

Without a doubt, the standard of living of the average Iranian has clearly and systematically been falling for many years, which is the result not only of sanctions and the international isolation of the country, but also the very structure and nature of the Iranian economy, permanently backward and suffering from under-investment. Recent turmoil and the reckless actions of the authorities only accelerated a number of negative economic and financial trends. Also important is the fact that many sectors of the Iranian economy (such as the oil industry) have been appropriated by the military structure, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Is the deteriorating economic situation in Iran able to trigger social revolt on a scale comparable with the events of the Arab Spring? Such a scenario cannot be ruled out, although one should not expect critical and violent events in the near future. The signals of social discontent in Iran suggest that its level is still quite low and concerns rather specific professional groups or even individual companies or plants. Until that happens, the government on a regular basis will probably keep suppressing these local, scattered flurries of discontent. If, however, the protests spread throughout the country, and moreover, start to gain a level of organization and coordination, the situation of the regime would start to deteriorate.

The nature of the nuclear program, so vitally important to the strategic objectives of Iran, makes the authorities in Tehran strive to continue it at any cost. Perhaps even at the cost of a brutal drowning in blood of any public protests: even those with only economic and existential grounds without any connection to politics.

In addition, one should remember that so far any public protests and signs of social discontent that have taken place in Iran in recent weeks did not have (except a few marginal incidents) any political background. This is a very important element, indicating that the Iranians have so far not connected directly their economic and financial situation with the political aspect. This situation could change quickly. However, there is no political force within the country that could be a viable alternative to the current system of power. After the fall of the "green revolution" three years ago, the regime effectively dismantled any major organized opposition against the current structure of the political order. Any reshuffle and political castling as a result of public protests would take place only within the

ruling camp.

The prospect of a "Night of the Long Knives" in Tehran?

The struggle between the various factions within the regime has already begun, as evidenced by the recent arrest of Hashemi Rafsanjani's two children. The son and daughter of the influential Ayatollah, Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council of Iran, were arrested in September 2012 in the space of a few days and accused of anti-state activities. This is an unprecedented action, and reflects well the current state of affairs in the Iranian circles of power. Only a few months ago it would have been inconceivable that the state security services (strictly subject to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) dared to raise their hand to the relatives of the incumbent chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, a former President, a politician with influence and importance that goes far beyond his current official role. Such a step shows an intensification of fears of the most conservative part of the Iranian political elite, centered around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, concerned about the direction in which the situation in the country and around it is developing. Rafsanjani has long appeared as an open critic of the current government, and as a politician of the highest rank who was almost openly sympathetic to the leaders of the opposition of the Green Movement under house arrest. The impact on his children is an extremely tricky preventive measure, a typical political "low blow", designed to protect ultraconservatives against excessive activity on his part, and thus exclude him from any potential power game. It is also proof of the isolation of Rafsanjani at the top of government circles. He has now found himself in a very vulnerable situation, where the threat is posed not only to his future political position or business, but also his own life and the lives of his nearest and dearest. The regime seems to be coming to a point where, without any scruples, it will conduct some bloody power-play in order to maintain influence and power in the country, such as the infamous "Night of the Long Knives" in Nazi Germany.

Behind all these power games involving the political elite, there are also other aspects, such as the private business interests of individual politicians and senior commanders of the IRGC, who are threatened with the loss of their shares in the profits of the semi-legal or even illegal business operations. The game is not only about political power and prestige, but also (and perhaps primarily) for a fabulous income from shady ventures, which the IRGC structure has entwined around the Iranian economy in recent years.

The unfavorable socio-economic situation in the country and the deteriorating geopolitical position of Iran in the Middle East, as well as an increased risk of foreign military intervention, might lead ultra-conservatives to take radical steps. This applies to both a stronger crackdown on domestic opposition (whether real or imaginary; the Rafsanjani case is a primary symptom of such a strategy), as well as foreign policy. The interests and strategic objectives of Iran in the region are now seriously threatened, mainly due to unfavorable to Tehran developments around Syria, and growing international pressure related to Iran's nuclear program. This situation creates uncertainty and tensions among the Iranian power elite, which in turn makes their actions become more and more nervous and unpredictable. On the other hand, an open armed conflict in the region involving Iran, and especially so as to provoke an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, might well be seen in Tehran as a positive way out of the current crisis. This would be a perfect scenario that would distract the Iranian public attention away from economic problems. This would also be an ideal factor in the consolidation of the society around the current regime, and thus strengthening the power of the ayatollahs. In addition, any attack on Iran would also – from the perspective of the current propaganda and narrative of the current government – serve as a very good argument for Iran's need to have a nuclear weapon as an effective deterrent to any aggressor.

Conclusions and recommendations

For the Islamic Republic of Iran the nuclear program has a fundamental and strategic importance. From the perspective of Tehran, possession of nuclear weapons would be a final and total guarantee of immunity from regional and outside enemies and the condition of the survival of the current state and regime. The objective of obtaining nuclear weapons justifies any means and Iran is ready for even the most serious consequences: international condemnation, ostracism from the countries of the region and the West, and even severe sanctions crippling the economy. It is clearly visible that the Iranians carefully studied the case of North Korea here, and the sudden, radical improvement of its international status after the announcement that it had come into possession of nuclear weapons.

The international community, especially the United States and the European Union, must be aware of these geopolitical conditions. The key here seems to be to attempt to prevent Tehran from the "nuclear breakthrough" that would mean the inevitable geopolitical breakthrough in Iran's regional position. Recent reports from Iran also suggest that sanctions are apparently finally starting to work, which gives hope that the current balance of power in Tehran will either bend to the international community, or it will become more compliant (though likely still within the theocratic regime that has been in place in Iran for the last 30 years). However, there is a serious risk that before this happens, the Iranians will achieve the mentioned 'nuclear breakthrough' and will announce to the world that they possess nuclear weapons at their disposal. And then any sanctions will no longer be relevant.

Following the illusory hope that the recent unrest in Iran could quickly lead to a significant political change in this country, the political economic and propaganda pressure against Iran cannot be lessened. On the contrary, it seems necessary to step up pressure on Tehran, including the open emphasis that the military option in the form of a series of precision strikes that could set Iran's nuclear program back by a decade, is still on the table.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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