

Chapter 20

The Iranian National Perspective on Nuclear Non-proliferation



Ali Akbar Salehi

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a distinct pleasure to join all of you in this important Conference. Let me, at the very outset, seize the opportunity to express my deep appreciation to the organizers of the Conference for the kind invitation. Dedicated to the commemoration of the scientific work and achievements of the late Professor Amaldi, the very title and the work program of the Conference points to its relevance to the wide range of serious issues the international community is grappling with in the field of nuclear industry and related activities.

Mr. Chairman,

Addressing a Conference of this kind and caliber—with quite a strong scientific content and yet placed in the context of on-going political discussions, puts me in a very challenging situation. At one level, finding myself in the company of fellow nuclear physicists gives me an academic feeling to delve into theoretical discussions. Yet at another level, under my current hat at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, I have to focus on concrete issues and situations, which, interestingly enough, happen to be a matter of common concern to all of us. Hence, nothing these days appears to be more pressing and critical than the fate of the Iran nuclear deal—JCPOA. So, that constitutes the thrust of my remarks here today; what it means for us and presumably for the international community.

Mr. Chairman,

Despite the fact that Iran's original interest in the nuclear industry dates back to the post-WWII "Atom for Peace Program" era, its nuclear program is yet at a humble stage in comparison with the state of the industry in more advanced countries. At this point, I would only limit myself to presenting a sketchy, broad brush of major turning points in the development of our nuclear program. The construction of Tehran Nuclear Research Reactor in 1967—which is still operative

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127

—laid the foundation for our nuclear activities in this area. Subsequent commercial nuclear negotiations with the United States in early 1970s and later more serious collaborative efforts with France and Germany, eventually, proved inconclusive, especially in the wake of Saddam's aggression against Iran in September 1980, and thus the program came to a practical halt. Soon after the end of the War in 1988, the interest in reviving the peaceful national nuclear program re-emerged as a matter of priority in the minds of our political leadership.

Drawing on the past experiences, especially in light of the sanctions imposed on the country following the victory of the Revolution in 1979 as well as during the 8-year Iran- Iraq War, the need for achieving self-reliance in most strategic domains including the nuclear one became an important component of Iran's policy making. The efforts towards starting uranium enrichment to provide the needed fuel for the reactors came from those perceptions and convictions, which coincidentally led to serious disagreement with major western countries. The drama that unfolded as of mid-2002 around the alleged enrichment activities at one of our nuclear sites called the Natanz Facility pushed the issue of Iran's nuclear program on the international scene into a highly-politicized propaganda campaign. That episode, and its later developments, in and out of the IAEA, are now history, and fully known to all those in the say.

The 2003–2005 period of negotiations on the nuclear program between Iran and the three European countries, which also involved close working relations with the Agency, tried to resolve the outstanding issues and remove the then existing misunderstanding on and around our peaceful nuclear program. The Supreme Leader's religious decree (fatwa) on the prohibition of production, deployment and use of nuclear weapons, similar to other weapons of mass destruction, also played its critical and determining role in this regard. Looking back, one cannot but lament that the two-year negotiations proved inconclusive, which as everybody knows, came about as a result of the US negative attitude and exertion of pressure on European interlocutors, and also on the Agency, through raising a wide range of contentious issues and allegations, including Iran's involvement in activities with possible military dimensions. Later, however, IAEA reports disproved all those allegations.

The failed negotiations during the 2003–2005 period pushed the nuclear dossier out of the IAEA and into the UN Security Council with its chain of sanctions resolutions, and led to a long, almost 8-year period of subsequent futile negotiations. All throughout this period, the U.S pursued its negative stance and the policy of “zero enrichment”—which was obviously simply unacceptable to Iran and a non-starter for all practical purposes. Iran's actual response to the US obstinate and impractical position and demand was to rely instead on “resistance and strategic endurance.”

Distinguished Colleagues,

The US-imposed impasse in the negotiations, with all its ensued negative consequences, finally led to a change of outlook within the American body politics specifically during President Obama's second term. The obviously futile imposition of the so-called “zero enrichment” dogma gave way to a more pragmatic,

solution-oriented approach in Washington, which, coincidentally, found its counterpart in Iran following the June 2013 election of President Rouhani. The quite interesting and I should say, equally exciting and challenging negotiations ultimately culminated in a promising, win-win nuclear deal called the JCPOA. A deal that ensured Iran's inalienable statutory rights and privileges as stipulated in the NPT.

Mr. Chairman

That's just a brief overview of what transpired on and around our peaceful nuclear program. The nuclear deal certainly ushered a new era of engagement between Iran and the international community at large. And the way it was achieved signify the irreplaceable reliance on innovative science diplomacy and political negotiations as the preferred option for and means of resolving international disagreements and disputes. It also served as a conduit for confidence-building, in very practical terms, between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the western countries, even including the U.S.—notwithstanding the lack of political and diplomatic relations between the two countries for almost four decades and preponderance of mutual suspicion and mistrust.

Furthermore, the nuclear deal has so far provided the opportunity for Iran to exercise, in accordance with the provisions of NPT, its full peaceful nuclear activities unhampered and expanding further its acquired capabilities in other domains such as agriculture, industry, and health. Given the traditional, and long-standing reliance of the Iranian economy on fossil fuels, and the imperative of gradual and progressive reduction of such reliance, including for globally-shared environmental concerns and considerations, Iran definitely needs to make its basket of energy sources more diverse. Production of clean, safe nuclear energy should play its due and expected role in this regard. Based on such IAEA models as LEP, MESSAGE, ETSAP and WASP, consideration of 8–12% nuclear energy in the mixed energy basket of Iran seems justifiable.

Mr. Chairman

Apart from the overall merits of JCPOA—whether for Iran or for the other parties—it is reasonable to argue that its faithful implementation, as envisioned in the text of the agreement, will serve a set of other purposes, including the strengthening of NPT. In the mean time, it has affected the perception of achieving a better balance among the three main pillars of the Treaty; namely non-proliferation, peaceful cooperation and comprehensive disarmament. The potential contribution to the first two pillars hardly needs any further elucidation; they almost look like *fait-accompli*, especially in so far as contribution to non-proliferation is concerned. The progress thus far achieved between Iran and other countries with regards to peaceful cooperation is promising and moving in the right direction.

As far as the third pillar is concerned, the JCPOA would be further strengthened if the establishment of a comprehensive disarmament as well as the Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East is materialized.

Excellencies,

This overall assessment of the merits of the JCPOA brings me to the important and practical point of how to protect and preserve the deal in the interest of the partners as well as the larger international community. The hard-won agreement, in which I was personally engaged, especially at its technical level is simply too precious to be allowed to be undermined or weakened. In contrast to the US administration's negative perception, there is a clear picture and understanding of the accord and its related commitments in Iran. We believe that the entire international community also shares a similar outlook.

The unfortunate trend across the Atlantic since the new American administration took office early this year especially the recent delusionary negative postures do not augur well at all. As stated dubiously, for instance, the US administration pretends that the most glaring flaw of JCPOA is its sunset provision. While we believe that a similar negotiation without a sunset or timeline is not a negotiation anymore; rather it is an utter submission.

To conclude, I would like to make solid clear that we do not want to see the deal unravel. However, much more is at stake for the entire international community than the national interests of Iran-where the US wishes to harm- if the deal is dissolved.

Needless to say, that the US withdrawal from the deal would seriously affect Iran's state of politics in this regard. Moreover, it's worth mentioning that the failure of the nuclear deal, undoubtedly, will undermine the political credibility and the international stature of the US in this tumultuous international political environment. Should the JCPOA survive out of the current odds and turmoil the way will be paved for the resolution of other major similar international issues in the future. Let's hope that under these circumstances, commonsense and discretion shall prevail.

I thank all of you for your kind indulgence.

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