

# US steps up pressure on Iran's nuclear programs

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The US administration intensified its pressure on Tehran after a leaked International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) letter written on Wednesday revealed Iran had doubled the number of gas centrifuges installed in an underground hall at its Natanz uranium enrichment facility.

US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe condemned the Iranian government for continuing to “to defy the international community” and lead its people “down a path of further isolation”. Warning of tougher sanctions, Johndroe said, “Iran looks like it may be headed for additional resolutions” at the UN Security Council.

The Bush administration has already bullied the UN Security Council into passing two resolutions imposing a series of penalties on Iran for refusing to shut down its enrichment facilities and halt construction on its heavy water research reactor at Arak. The most recent resolution, adopted last month, extended the list of individuals and bodies targeted for financial penalties and imposed a voluntary ban on exported Iranian weapons. It set Iran a further 60-day deadline to comply, which is due to elapse in late May.

The Iranian government has made no secret of its refusal to shut down its nuclear facilities, insisting on its rights under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. Last week President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad boasted at a ceremony at the Natanz plant that Iran had begun producing nuclear fuel on “an industrial scale” but gave no details. Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani hinted to reporters that as many as 3,000 centrifuges were now working.

The IAEA letter, written by deputy director general Olli Heinonen, made clear Iran was, at the very least, months away from having such an “industrial capacity”. It noted that Iran had eight 164-centrifuge cascades in place—that is, 1,312 centrifuges—and that “some UF<sub>6</sub> (uranium hexafluoride gas) is being fed into these cascades”. A report in the *New York Times* added: “American officials said the amount of fuel now being fed into the system was so small that it might indicate that the Iranians were trying a test run

with the delicate machinery”.

US and international media reports routinely declare that uranium enrichment can be used either to produce nuclear fuel or a nuclear bomb. Editorial policy also appears to mandate the inclusion of an estimate that 3,000 centrifuges spinning for a year would produce enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb. Reports that are more unscrupulous intentionally blur the distinction between low enrichment and high enrichment, to declare that Iran is now making fuel for a nuclear weapon.

It is certainly true that gas centrifuge technology can be used to provide fuel for a nuclear reactor, or to make fissionable material for a bomb. But it is deliberately misleading to imply, as top US officials frequently do, that enrichment capacity automatically means that Iran is secretly making a weapon. Tehran continues to adhere to the NPT and is subject to its restraints, including IAEA inspections and audits of all nuclear material to verify that none is being diverted to a secret weapons program.

Heinonen's letter noted that Iran had recently agreed to more intrusive measures at Natanz, including allowing IAEA inspectors to make unannounced visits and install tamper-proof, 24-hour monitoring cameras directed at the centrifuge cascades. The letter's main purpose was to urge Iran to reverse its closure of the Arak reactor construction site to inspection—a step taken to protest against the UN sanctions, which Tehran has declared breach its NPT rights and are thus illegal.

Despite Ahmadinejad's grandiose declarations, it is far from clear that Iran has mastered the uranium enrichment process. Putting large numbers of centrifuges in place, and operating them continuously at high speed with the highly reactive UF<sub>6</sub> gas, are two different things. The sophisticated centrifuges are subject to frequent breakdown if not operated correctly. The IAEA confirmed last year that Iran had produced a small quantity of low enriched uranium, but also found that continuous operation had not been achieved—an indication of significant technical problems. Iran originally claimed that it would have 3,000 centrifuges up and running

by mid-2006.

Iran underscored its intention to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, by calling this week for bids to build two more nuclear power reactors at Bushehr. The US immediately responded by urging international firms to avoid doing business with Iran. Constant US obstruction, stretching back more than a decade, to Iranian efforts to complete its first power reactor at Bushehr is cited by Tehran as the reason for wanting its own capacity to fuel its nuclear plants. Under US pressure, Russia has again delayed completion of the nearly finished reactor until next year.

Despite their claims to be seeking a diplomatic solution, Bush administration officials have continued to declare that all options—including the military one—are on the table. Numerous leaks to the US and international media this year indicate that the American and Israeli militaries are actively preparing for an attack on the pretext of stopping Iran from building nuclear weapons. In an interview with the *Australian* in February, Vice President Dick Cheney raised the possibility of an attack as soon as Iran demonstrated its capacity to enrich. “You get various estimates of where the point of no return is,” he mused. “Is it when they possess weapons or does it come sooner, when they have mastered the technology but perhaps not yet produced fissile material for weapons?”

Republican presidential contender John McCain also made clear in February his support for a US attack, by declaring that the only thing worse than a military confrontation with Iran would be a nuclear-armed Iran. In a grotesque joke on the campaign trail in South Carolina this week, McCain gave an insight into the belligerent thinking in the most militarist layers of American ruling circles. When asked his attitude to an attack on Iran, he responded in cavalier fashion with a rendition of the Beach Boys tune “Barbara Ann” to the words “Bomb Iran ... bomb, bomb, bomb ...” He dismissed critics, saying they should “lighten up and get a life”.

There is nothing particularly comical about the build-up of US military firepower in the Persian Gulf or the Pentagon’s plans for a blitzkrieg, not only against Iranian nuclear facilities, but also its military and industrial infrastructure. A third US naval battle group, including the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, a guided missile cruiser and four guided missile destroyers left San Diego in early April for the Persian Gulf. While the USS Nimitz is to join the USS John C. Stennis, replacing the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, for a period of weeks, the Pentagon will have three aircraft carrier battle groups in the area, just as the UN Security Council is due to meet again.

This week President Bush added another allegation to the dossier of US propaganda, accusing Iran of fuelling a regional arms race. Speaking at Tippecanoe High School on

Thursday, he declared: “Iran’s a serious problem. This is a country we believe wants to have a nuclear weapon.... I’m very worried about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.” He was referring in particular to a prominent *New York Times* article last weekend, which revealed that the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and various Gulf states have announced plans in recent months for extensive nuclear programs for electricity generation.

Bush’s hypocrisy is breathtaking. Having destabilised the entire region through its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration has over the past six months actively encouraged an “anti-Shiite” and “anti-Persian” alliance against Iran, led by prominent US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states. If these “Sunni” states now feel the need to develop the capacity to build nuclear weapons—an assertion for which there is no evidence—it is primarily because of the sectarian tensions inflamed by the US.

Moreover, there is no sign that the US will insist that its allies refrain from developing the capacity to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. Bush’s “worries” reflect concerns not so much in US ruling circles, but in Israel, that neighbouring Arab states will end its current regional monopoly of nuclear weapons, by developing their own. The Bush administration has repeatedly opposed calls by Arab states for a Middle East free of nuclear weapons because that would require Israel to give up its nuclear arsenal.

Washington’s efforts to establish a “Sunni” alliance against Iran are already producing a volatile conventional arms race in the Middle East. Huge multi-billion dollar US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have triggered protests by Israel, which has objected in particular to the sale of precision-guided weapons. During a visit to the region this week, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates had to reassure Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that the US was committed to maintaining Israel’s “quantitative military edge” over its Arab neighbours.

Through its reckless preparations for confrontation with Iran, the Bush administration is creating the conditions for a disastrous conflict throughout the Middle East.



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