

Why Are the IAEA and Dr. Mohammed El-Baradei Protecting Iran?

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- For over three years, the quarterly IAEA reports on Iran contained the details of violations, obstruction of inspector's visits, important inconsistencies between official claims and the results of tests from samples taken from various facilities, and other forms of non-compliance. But the final assessment in each report, signed by the director-general, absurdly concluded that this evidence did not demonstrate that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons.
- El-Baradei may have chosen what he sees as the path of least resistance by acquiescing to Iran's aspirations to become a nuclear power. This was also the dominant view in Europe, at least until the rise of Ahmadinejad and the realization that stable deterrence based on the U.S.-Soviet Cold War model was not applicable to a nuclear-armed Iran.
- El-Baradei's complicity in the Iranian effort to acquire nuclear weapons is counterproductive. The further that Iran advances, the higher the probability of confrontation and military action in the next two to four years.
- Instead, if the IAEA and El-Baradei were to join in the effort to warn and deter the Iranian regime, it might still be possible to halt the uranium enrichment and similar activities, without needing to use force.

Denying the Obvious

The repeated statements by Dr. Mohammed El-Baradei, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), incongruously denying that Iran is seeking and making progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons, are difficult to explain. The evidence is staring everyone in the face - the banks of centrifuges from A.Q. Khan's proliferation supermarket (used by Pakistan for its bomb) and other technology inappropriate for a civil power program; the subterfuge that kept these and other activities from the IAEA inspectors for many years; the import of components and evidence of facilities for testing weapons design. Taken together, the case is overwhelming, not only in Washington and Jerusalem, but also in Paris, London, Moscow and Beijing.

So why is El-Baradei insisting on denying the obvious? He is an Egyptian national, but without a history of ideologically or religiously motivated policies or statements, and does not share the visceral anti-Israel and anti-Western positions held by the Nasserites such as Amr Mousa (ex-foreign minister and now head of the Arab League). Indeed, when El-Baradei was first nominated to head the IAEA after many years as a lower level official, the Egyptian government proposed another candidate. And in official visits to Israel, El-Baradei showed a

high level of diplomatic skill in repeating the traditional call for universal accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but acknowledging the complexity of the Israeli situation. His statements and activities projected an image of an international civil servant who took these obligations and commitments seriously.

Seeking to Rehabilitate the IAEA

In this spirit, during his first years as IAEA director-general beginning in 1997, El-Baradei continued and even accelerated the effort to rehabilitate the IAEA and its tattered image as the world's nuclear proliferation watchdog under the 1970 NPT. In 1981, following the Israeli operation that destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor before it could start producing plutonium, the

IAEA was exposed as lacking professionalism and credibility. Officials were shown to have closed their collective eyes to Saddam Hussein's illegal diversions from an ostensibly civil nuclear program to weapons development, leaving Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin with no alternative to military action.

The IAEA's inspectors and verification experts worked to re-establish credibility, enforcing enhanced safeguards that were designed to prevent the kind of subterfuge employed by Saddam. Their detailed reports on the status of Iraq's nuclear program during this period (and its limitations) turned out, in some areas, to be more accurate than the U.S. government assessments. And while El-Baradei's interpretation of the dangers posed by Saddam's continuing nuclear activities downplayed the implications, and he argued against the military action that removed Saddam Hussein, the IAEA did not cover up or tamper with the evidence.

Ignoring the Evidence on Iranian Nuclear Weapons Development

But on Iran, the IAEA under El-Baradei has again lost credibility and is covering up wholesale violations of the NPT and the efforts of the extremist leaders of the Islamic Republic to acquire nuclear weapons. For over three years, the quarterly IAEA reports on Iran contained the details of violations, obstruction of inspector's visits, important inconsistencies between official claims and the results of tests from samples taken from various facilities, and other forms of non-compliance. But the final assessment in each report, signed by the director-general, absurdly concluded that this evidence did not demonstrate that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons. This process delayed the imposition of sanctions that might have dissuaded Iran from this path. Eventually, even the more reluctant leaders in Russia, China, and India recognized the overwhelming nature of the evidence, rejected El-Baradei's assertions, and voted in September 2005 to officially find Iran in non-compliance with the NPT and to start the sanctions process.

Since then, El-Baradei's summaries of the quarterly IAEA reports, which are the basis for UN Security Council reviews and consideration of increased sanctions, continue to deny the Iranian threat. He also has started to echo Iranian claims to be beyond the "point of no return" in enriching uranium to the level required for weapons - a boast that the IAEA's own data does not support. This has again cast the IAEA as a target for derision and ridicule and led some key professionals to leave the agency.

El-Baradei's behavior also has slowed the impact of the limitations imposed by the U.S.-led international "coalition of the willing" on Iranian banks and financial institutions. These targeted sanctions have had a very direct impact on the regime and leadership, leading to signs of rising dissatisfaction and acts of defiance in Iran. There is evidence that more

sanctions would accelerate the internal opposition and slow or even force a halt to the effort to acquire nuclear weapons.

Explaining El-Baradei's Behavior

It is difficult to explain the logic of El-Baradei's behavior, which is the opposite of what is expected for the head of an international watchdog organization whose decisions have a major impact on international security and stability. One factor may be personal - in 2005, when the Bush Administration opposed his selection for a third term as director-general, in large part because of the Iranian cover-up, they failed to get much support in the Board of Governors. Supporting Iran is the most effective form of retaliation against the United States.

Beyond this dimension, El-Baradei understandably wants to defend the IAEA and the NPT framework from a wrenching confrontation over the Iranian nuclear weapons program that could mark the end of this security framework based on treaties and international enforcement organizations. He may have chosen what he sees as the path of least resistance by acquiescing to Iran's aspirations to become a nuclear power. This was also the dominant view in Europe, at least until the rise of Ahmadinejad and the realization that stable deterrence based on the U.S.-Soviet Cold War model was not applicable to a nuclear-armed Iran and a regional arms race.

After having failed to prevent the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the IAEA's director-general may now be overcompensating by embracing the Iranian claims in the hope of preventing a military attack on Iran. His angry reaction to unconfirmed reports that Israel destroyed a North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria, and the demand that information on NPT violations be provided to the IAEA for action, can also be understood as an attempt to salvage the agency's severely damaged reputation.

But if this is El-Baradei's objective, his complicity in the Iranian effort to acquire nuclear weapons and the obvious attempt to cover-up the evidence is counterproductive. The further that Iran advances, the higher the probability of confrontation and military action in the next two to four years. Instead, if the IAEA and El-Baradei were to join in the effort to warn and deter the Iranian regime, it might still be possible to halt the uranium enrichment and similar activities, without needing to use force. This is the only way that the NPT will survive, and the world will be spared the dangers of a radical Iranian regime armed with nuclear weapons.

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