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Dealing with Iran's nuclear breaches decisively

By Karen Ramus, President of the U.S. Alliance for Democratic Iran

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Imagine this: An armed robber is caught red-handed. He confesses to many of his crimes short of several robberies that included murders, with the intention to buy time and evade the murder charges. The prosecutor has the details on an 18-year crime spree--including the murders. But the judge, praising the felon's "honesty," releases him saying he must be given a second chance. Will this serve as justice or deterrence?

That's exactly how the European Union's big three--Britain, France and Germany--are treating Iran's 18 years of lies and deception about its nuclear program. On Wednesday, the International Atomic Energy Agency's governing board adopted a resolution that, despite Iran's systematic breach of its obligations to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, did not refer the case to the UN Security Council. Still, the resolution "strongly deplored" Tehran's violations and warned that the IAEA will use "all options at its disposal" if more breaches are reported

Last week, the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana praised Iran for its "honesty" and the EU's big three said that as a reward for "honesty and transparency" they would consider exchanging technology with Iran.

The details of Iran's secret nuclear activities provide a stunning picture of a strategic and sophisticated program that began in the mid-1980s. As Gary Samore of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London said, "This is unquestionably a bomb program. The purpose is to develop a weapons material capability. Nothing else makes sense given the scale of the Iranian nuclear power program."

The IAEA's dumbfounding conclusion that it had not yet found any "evidence" of Iran's nuclear weapons program, however, provided some diplomatic ammunition for Iran and its friends in the nuclear watchdog agency to try to block the systematic breaches from being referred to the UN Security Council.

The EU's extensive trade with Tehran explains its reluctance to take firm action. "The European Union is by far Iran's biggest trade partner, accounting for 28 percent of Iran's exports and imports in 2001, more than twice as much as 2nd place Japan," wrote the Washington Times earlier this month.

Just because the jury is still out on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the mullahs should not be let off the hook. Tehran's own admissions to the IAEA give greater legitimacy to Washington's concern over Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Tehran's partial disclosures to the IAEA are the tip of the iceberg. It would be naive to suggest that now, after 18 years of systematic deception, Iran's rulers have had a genuine change of heart.

By giving the IAEA a bare minimum to dodge UN sanctions, the cunning mullahs are simply trying to buy time to set in place all the components needed to make a bomb.

And let's not forget that the much publicized "recent co-operation" by Tehran with the IAEA came about only as a result of intense international pressure after last year's revelations by the Iranian opposition group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, and Washington's call for IAEA's immediate action. Last week, an IAEA official told the Los Angeles Times that "[Last August] was the first time we got information from the CIA and Iranian opposition groups saying that the Iranians were building a secret [uranium] enrichment plant ... When confronted with that, the Iranians admitted it, and that triggered the whole process."

Iran's nuclear weapons program is at the core of a strategic military plan designed to exert Tehran's dominance in the Persian Gulf region and beyond.

Iran's former President Hashemi Rafsanjani is on the record as saying that Iran could use nuclear weapons against its regional adversaries: "In a nuclear duel in the region, Israel may kill 100 million Muslims. Muslims can sustain such casualties, knowing that, in exchange, there would be no Israel on the map."

As Samore has said, "no amount of diplomatic maneuvering and political pressure is likely to persuade Iran to drop what has become a top national priority."

The prospect of a nuclear-armed theocracy in Iran is frightening for the whole region--and the world. Ultimately only when the ruling regime in Tehran is replaced with a democratic, secular, peaceful government will Iran no longer be a nuclear threat. In the meantime, however, Iran's blatant breaches of obligations must be dealt with decisively. The Washington Post reported Wednesday that a U.S. official said "I think there is going to be material and disclosures over the next few months will show that Iran is still in violation."

Thanks to U.S. firmness, an implicit "trigger mechanism" has been included in the IAEA's resolution that will automatically take Tehran to the UN Security Council if it violates the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This demand for safeguards cannot be compromised. The clerics must not be allowed to squirm their way out of this situation.

U.S. national security interests and Middle East stability are far too important to gamble on the honesty of Iran's mullahs. Two decades of covert Iranian nuclear activity, the EU's commercial considerations and geopolitical rivalries with the United States cannot and must not undermine America's long-term security interests in the region and beyond. The clock is ticking.

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