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Mediating the Nuclear Impasseⁱ

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Iran's insistence on enriching uranium in defiance of three UN Security Council resolutions, combined with a bevy of antagonistic threats aimed at Israel's existence has created an explosive recipe that may well precipitate a horrifying regional conflagration. For Iran's own best interests, its contentious leaders would be well advised to tone down their anti-Israeli threats, which have not been taken lightly thus far, and find a diplomatic solution to Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program. The recent Israeli air force exercises and American naval maneuvers in the Persian Gulf, which were countered by Iran's test-firing of a variety of missiles, have only heightened an already tense atmosphere.

It is now critical to look at who might be in a position to defuse the tension and restore some stability to a volatile region already battered by a devastating war in Iraq. At this point, Turkey has made itself well positioned geopolitically to play such a significant role. The fact that the Bush administration has shifted policy after nearly three decades and agreed to participate in the international talks with Iran's nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili in Geneva may well open the door for future direct talks to be facilitated by the Turks.

Israeli concerns over Iran's nuclear program are real and escalating rapidly, regardless of the fact that the US and the International Energy and Atomic Agency (IEAE) show different estimates of how close Iran is to obtaining the needed

materials and technology. Israelis know well that while the United States and Europe are weary of Iran's nuclear ambitions, they do not share Israel's sense of urgency about Iran's nuclear potential. The Jews' history in Europe does not offer Israel the luxury of taking matters of national survival lightly. Thus Israel tends to limit the scope of risks it can take with any one of its neighbors. Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak noted recently that "Israel is the strongest country in the region and has proved in the past it is not afraid to take action when its vital security interests are at stake." Indeed, when survival is at stake, an Israeli official told me during my recent visit to the region, the Israelis will not worry about public relations.

That being said, Israel wants to avoid escalation of the conflict with Iran fearing that such an extremely sensitive issue could result in a terrible miscalculation. Syrian President Bashar Assad also spoke on the issue last week stating that "The problem is that when one starts such action in the Middle East, one cannot manage the reactions that can spread out over years or even decades." For this reason, Israel will continue to seek and push for a diplomatic solution and welcomes the American participation in the upcoming talks with Iran. However, should there not be a breakthrough in these and future talks, Israel will not wait until Iran reaches the point of no return—the point in which Iran musters the technology to produce a nuclear weapon.

With the best of intentions Britain, France and Germany, representing the EU in the negotiations with Iran have thus far failed to persuade Iran to cease its enrichment of uranium. Swimming with oil money, Iran continues to defy three sets of UN sanctions almost with impunity while making considerable progress in its nuclear program. From the Iranian vantage point, the American preoccupation in Iraq and increasingly in Afghanistan substantially reduces the risks of an American attack on Iran. It is doubtful that under the present circumstances the next round of talks even with US participation will produce different results. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei plainly stated on July 16th that "In relations to the negotiations...we have clearly defined red lines"—a reference to Iran's insistence that it has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.

Whether the next round of talks with Iran will help alleviate the tension between the US and Iran remains to be seen. What is needed at this critical time is a dramatic shift in the dynamic of the conflict, and this is where Turkey might be better suited to

mediate Iran's nuclear issue. In the five days of meetings I had in Ankara just recently, whenever the subject of Iran's nuclear program was mentioned Turkish officials and academics expressed grave concerns about the growing danger of yet another avoidable and potentially devastating war in the Middle East. For the Turks, finding a diplomatic solution is not one of many options but the only sane option to prevent a horrific outcome.

Apart from Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's recent claims that "Maybe the mediator role regarding Iran's nuclear issue will soon be given to Turkey" due to its recent diplomatic achievements between Israel and Syria, there are many reasons why Turkey may succeed in mediating a peaceful solution to the nuclear impasse. Other than being directly affected by regional events, Turkey generally enjoys good relations with all states in the region, it has not been tainted with the war in Iraq; it is a predominantly Muslim State, Middle Eastern as well as European. Turkey shares the longest-standing border with Iran, and has maintained good neighborly relations with Tehran for centuries with expanding trade relations. Moreover, Turkey and Iran share a similar sentiment and have collaborated recently on the Kurdish issue, and both have a shared interest in this regard for the emergence of a stable Iraq.

Whereas Turkey, at this juncture, may not be able to mediate between Israel and Iran, Ankara certainly stands a much better chance to mediate between Washington and Tehran. Moreover, the Iranian government is mostly concerned with the Bush Administration's attitude toward regime change in Tehran. Iran is terrified of the prospect of an American attack on its nuclear facilities, but its leadership wants assurances from the US that Washington will no longer pursue regime change and will treat it with dignity and respect in dealing with the nuclear issue. Because of Turkey's standing in the region and as a credible bridge to the West, Turkey might succeed where others have failed. Turkey is a close ally and a reliable friend of the United States; it is an important member of NATO, it has worked fervently to maintain the democratic nature of the state, and has received due praise for its recent diplomatic mediating efforts.

Turkey can better understand the nature of Iran's threats, specifically in connection with the United States who has made no secret of its efforts to support Ahmadinejad's opponents. Arzu Celalifer, a Turkish expert on Iran from the ISRO Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Ankara suggested that "Turkey may also be in

a better position than the EU representatives to bypass Ahmadinejad and reach out directly to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei." In addition, she said, "Turkey may offer a sort of plan B whereby Iran can be persuaded to enrich uranium on Turkish soil under strict IAEA monitoring." Turkey, in short, can change the dynamics by offering a new venue for Americans and Iranians to meet and by generating a new momentum for serious dialogue. Finally, Turkey can provide Iran with a dignified disengagement plan, because if Iran is to make any concessions it will more likely make them to a fellow Muslim-majority state with which it has long and friendly relations.

The decision of the Bush administration to participate in the upcoming round of negotiations, however belated, is a wise one. It offers an opportunity to end the nuclear conflict with Iran. Turkey and the US should build on this development and prevent once and for all the prospect of another potentially devastating war.

ⁱ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CiPS) or the University of Pretoria

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