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Tehran triangle: Russia, U.S. and nuclear power

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Question: Experts say you were one of the fathers of the Iranian nuclear industry. Can you describe its current situation?

Answer: It is true that I was among the initiators and participated in drafting a contract for the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant. The United States did not want to cooperate with us in the nuclear sphere and advanced unacceptable conditions. Therefore, we had to go east - to Iran, China and India. The Russian nuclear industry was dying; we had to save it and create jobs for unique specialists so as to prevent them from emigrating to countries that want to create their own nuclear bombs.

I have not been to Iran since I had left the post of the nuclear minister. But during my visits there I saw that Iran had very high nuclear research standards, which is not surprising. (...)

Question: What is your general assessment of Iran's nuclear capability now?

Answer: Though I am hardly in a position to judge, I have seen and talked to talented young experts when visiting their nuclear centers. Many of those people had graduated from universities in Western Europe and the United States; moreover, I just recently made a small inquiry to learn that around 10,000 young specialists are still being trained there. Russia has never trained Iranians, except for Bushehr power plant operators.

The West has helped greatly build Tehran's nuclear industry, a great embarrassment for the Americans nowadays: when they tell me they do not believe Iran really needs a national nuclear power industry, I just ask them: "OK, but were it not you who once said you were going to build 20 NPPs there? Could you then explain why we cannot do now what you thought was quite appropriate for yourselves?"

They won't answer, but the answer is simple enough. A country with a national nuclear power capability sets firmly on the cutting edge of global technology. This means that there will always be jobs at home, and young people will stay at home. A country has no future if its young generation is fleeing abroad.

My assessment of Iran's nuclear level would be straightforward: it is very high. I have seen people working with neutron generators there who could very ably handle the 3D neutron registration software, a very complicated package (they received it from France) which shows a very realistic pattern of neutron flows stemming from a nuclear fission reaction.

In the early 1990s, when I was in Iran for the first time, I saw there the magnificent American Sun 4 and Sun 5 computers, which the U.S. barred from selling to Russia but sold freely to Iran; and they were working there very effectively. It is true that Iranian girls wear black shawls to conceal their hair but the girls I saw - who had also graduated from U.S. universities - were very smart when it came to handling state-of-the-art computers. The Iranians just took the United States by surprise by toppling the shah and starting a new state that would not pander to Washington. In short, it was the United States who built Iran's nuclear workforce.

Historically, Persian people have been very intellectual. Of course, Iran saw a major setback in the beginning of the

19th century when Europe took the lead. But they have sent their young people to learn from the West, many are trained in the West now, and, I think, their research capability is very good.

And it has, in fact, very little to do with oil and gas. What the Americans do not like is Iran's national status, its government, its independence, and its reluctance to take orders from U.S. diplomats. This is a separate issue and it has nothing to do with Iran's nuclear program.

Question: Do we need to worry about an Iranian nuclear bomb in the near future?

Answer: People often ask me this question, which sometimes is formulated somewhat differently: "Do you think they want it or think about it?" I answer, yes, I do; they definitely want it and they clearly think about it, as nuclear weapons have become a critical factor of independence and sovereignty. The U.S. policy is mainly about exporting democracy by making offers one cannot refuse. They are doing this to countries whose history dates back millennia and who have unthinkable contributions to mankind under their belt. What Americans do not know how to do is take into account others' national sensitivities, customs, and traditions. What they are doing is trying to inculcate those countries with American lifestyles - something that is hardly possible.

Question: Back to Iran. Can it ultimately create a nuclear weapon?

Answer: Of course, it can. Any highly developed country can do this, it's available on the Internet, if you like. The truth is that one needs much money and time. In the case of Iran, I think, they will do it in 5-10 years. I mean, they will be able to build a basic nuclear weapon. This weapon will not be as modern as Russian or American, but it does not matter - the Americans are afraid of any, even old, nukes. Washington understands, sure enough, that however hard they try to build a nuclear missile shield, you don't have to deliver a nuke through space where the entire world will see it. There are many other ways, and what they are ultimately afraid of is at least one blast inside the United States. Their people will bury any administration that allows it to happen.

Question: The West does not trust Tehran. Why is Russia selling its nuclear technology to Iran?

Answer: Russia has never sold any nuclear technology. To tell you more, Russia, since Soviet times, has been constantly on watch for nuclear proliferation. Proliferation was something only the West, with its century-old free market economy, could engage into. This is just because a free market economy is profit-oriented. If some relevant materials or technologies appeared and was not included in prohibitive lists fast enough (state authorities were rarely fast enough), it was sold without ceremony.

Everything the Iranians have today has come from the West. Even our fuel for nuclear power plants will be withdrawn for reprocessing at home and replaced with fresh cells. What President [George W.] Bush is promoting now, as if it were his own brilliant idea, a nuclear fuel leasing system, when a country pays for fuel and we deliver on the conditions of removing fuel wastes. Some Russian experts and I proposed it more than a decade ago. But the Americans did not support us. Their millionaire Alex Copson was in this business then and he wanted to do this, but President Clinton did not allow him to.

Question: Was Copson working with the Department of Energy?

Answer: He wasn't. Our acquaintance was a coincidence, in fact; he came to me with a project to lease a Pacific atoll and to use it as nuclear dumpsite and production facility for nuclear fuel - in order to have a dumpsite in a remote...

Question: And well-guarded, I expect?

Answer: ...absolutely - remote, neutral territory. Well, the point is, we have never sold anything abroad because the Americans were there. They sold, I have already mentioned that, even plutonium, to say nothing of other things. Do you know how Israel and South Africa gained access to nuclear weapons? It's clear they did.

Question: How?

Answer: With help from the U.S.

Question: There is information that the British helped Israel...

Answer: They did but they were far from alone there. Israelis got a great deal of help from Washington through a British-American company in South Africa. In Africa isotopes were separated by filtering uranium hexafluoride through a convergent-divergent nozzle, rather than in a centrifuge or by diffusion. Israelis may have got one or two [nuclear] charges and even tested them.

Later, South Africa had to abandon all those activities. I have been there and I can say the facilities were working very effectively as long as the white minority was in charge. They are not working any longer, small bits may have gone to Israel - may have gone, mind you, but in any case they have stored them for too long to retain real effect.

Question: Were you referring to the nuclear charges?

Answer: Yes. Israelis may have withdrawn them from South Africa but even so, I guess, Israel cannot be a nuclear power. They were not able to do anything at home because they had no capacity and no place to put it, what with the entire Israeli territory immediately subject to hostile incoming fire.

Question: Few think like you when the Israeli nuclear capability is on the table. Some respected researchers claim Tel-Aviv has nearly 200 nuclear charges.

Answer: You don't say so! They might have two or three, which are in any case as old as sin and yield no more than a kiloton. This explains why Israel is silent on the issue, they just have little to say. Moreover, there is really little need for nuclear weapons when you have such an umbrella as the United States.

Question: Back to Iran again, if you don't mind. Why do you think Tehran has rejected the European pleas to leave the International Atomic Energy Agency's seals in place and keep from independent reactor research?

Answer: That's because I think it will take Europeans very long before they regain Iran's trust. They had activities there, and one day they ran away, leaving everything behind. Siemens, a respected European, German, corporation, abandoned everything as Americans pressed for it. Tehran, aware that this could happen again at any time, has clearly not treated its talks with the European Trio seriously enough.

Russia is different. They can see how we treat them; they can see that we support nuclear power industries and peaceful nuclear applications; we have proposed a joint venture that will bring profit to them as well as to us. What to us is going to be a good nuclear market, to them is going to be an opportunity to see what a [nuclear enrichment] facility is and how it works. To build all the centrifuges and everything for just one nuclear reactor would be ridiculous. Right now, to build all this would be a waste of money because the return on such investment will come in a hundred

years, if ever.

We told the Iranians that enrichment would be on the table as soon as they had plans for at least a dozen NPPs. They asked me whether we could build in Iran something like a facility we had built in China. But China is not Iran - they have diffusion and other facilities, they really need such things.

Question: Why would Tehran agree to build such a facility together with Russia?

Answer: I don't think a joint venture is interesting to them commercially right now; it is probably just a way to alleviate nuclear tensions that have been rising around Iran exponentially and to deny the Americans an opportunity to justify a military solution. You know, the Americans have deployed over 100,000 personnel in the neighboring Iraq; they have armor and air support and they have done everything to cross the border if required... I think the Iranians understand they need to keep Washington from doing this, at least for this spring. The Americans will hardly go to war in the scorching Iranian summer.

Question: The Americans might well opt for a missile strike instead...

Answer: Their missiles will come home to roost if they do it. Their task force in Iraq is already struggling, and imagine how dangerous their position will be if the Iranian army also launches an offensive. Iran may receive massive support from the broader Muslim world as well.

A possible option would be to ask Israel to strike [Iran], but they will not achieve anything because they do not know the exact locations and levels of protection. The recent American interest in penetrator munitions that would go off at hundred-meter depths is far from accidental. These munitions have yet to be built, though.

In short, a missile strike would do the U.S. more harm than good. This helps explain their tolerance to our talks with Iran. I think the Iranians will agree to our proposals though the talks will take months, through March and April, at least, to delay Americans beyond the period of [climatic] conditions appropriate for military action.

Any delay is good for Iran. What would also be good for them is an opportunity to see how such facilities work. They will get an insight into our production lines, though, importantly, not into our centrifuge know-how.

Question: What could be Russia's role in helping solve Iran's 'nuclear problem?'

Answer: Primarily, Russia could do it through a joint venture with Iran, providing services to everyone interested in nuclear power development but not interested in handling isotope enrichment.

Another question here is, I think, much more important. Even if there is restraint on military action, Iran may be subject to the so-called economic sanctions. If this country joins in, we will have to withdraw all our workforce from Iran and abandon all we did there, like we did in North Korea in the early 1990s. By then, we had built a research reactor there, thoroughly explored the territory to select a place for a nuclear power plant, and developed a broad personnel training effort.

Just two years after we had abandoned all this, the Americans created the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization with the United States, Japan, South and North Korea - not Russia, mind you, and said, OK, we are here to build a water-cooled reactor. Now Russia is in the dark as to what is going on there. In fact, we have been thrown out of that market, though no one was ever going to transfer nuclear weapons or technology to North Korea, and no one was going to defy the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

What worries me is that preconditions for the same mistake are building here, in Iran. However, only fools repeat such mistakes; clever people never do that.

Question: How is Russia going to get Iranian guarantees that it will not seek a nuclear weapon?

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Answer: Russia does not want Iran to have nuclear weapons and thinks that Tehran's nuclear desire should be restrained. But the ball is on the America's side now; They need to decide whether they like Iran or not, to realize that they are dealing with an ancient historic world power that will not accept pressure and threats. It might take time, but what is needed is negotiations, however lengthy.

Only the United States is in a position to alleviate this tension. Weapons are not going to provide a solution; with weapons, things will be even worse than the current appalling situation in Iraq or Afghanistan. What kind of democracy are you going to get if democracy is exported through use of force?

Question: What if the Iranians reject Russia's offer?

Answer: They won't. However, I fear the Americans will press for sanctions even if they don't.

Question: But they surely cannot make the entire world impose sanctions if Iran accepts our proposal?

Answer: I am afraid they could. Remember North Korea. Almost everyone pandered to Washington then, and we did, special thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev.

Question: Putin will not necessarily do what Mikhail [Gorbachev] broke his back on.

Answer: He hopefully won't. However, Putin is also in a tight corner, and so is entire Russia. So far we have been picking up great windfalls from high oil and gas prices but let's think what happens if windfalls cease to go down. What we have we clearly will not have forever. I believe in reason. Reason dictates that to start a war now would be a disgrace.

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