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# **The Iranian Nuclear Strategy – An Unconventional Approach**

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\* The following short essay is a summary I wrote following an extensive research I did on the Iranian nuclear program issue. It is based on academic research and my analysis of the international system. It was also published online in my blog: <http://youngdiplomat.blogspot.com/2010/03/iranian-nuclear-strategy-unconventional.html>

The uncertainty about the Iranian nuclear strategy has caused great tension in the Middle East and has re-centred the foreign policy agendas of world's biggest powers. An article written in January 2010 by Ephraim Kam and Ephraim Asculai from the Institute of National Security Studies predicts the timeline for the Iranian nuclear capability and reveals unprecedented, updated information about the Iranian nuclear program. After analyzing this article and current geo-political realities, **I argue that Iran has stopped the progress of its nuclear military program on the verge of nuclear capability and can resume it at any time when a political decision about it will be taken. Iran will resume the final stages of the program, if and only, when it increases its regional dominance and will be able to endure the consequences of becoming a nuclear state.** Moreover, being on the verge of having nuclear capability allows it to maintain an ambiguous image of its nuclear program. This image is aimed, firstly, at pretending not to be involved in a nuclear weapons program -- and therefore avoid international condemnations -- and, secondly, at provoking an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. I substantiate my argument on the following technological indicators and current political developments.

First, according to the IAEA, Iran is only enriching uranium up to 20%, which is the highest level of so-called "lower enriched uranium". Maintaining this uranium enrichment level allows Iran to claim that the uranium is meant for medical purposes. Since this level is legally acceptable for civilian purposes by IAEA, Iran avoids international suspicion and crimination. At the same time, producing and storing large amounts of 20% enriched Uranium significantly shortens the time required to reach 90% uranium, necessary for military purposes (the first stages of enrichment are much longer than the last stages of enrichment).

Second, not all of the gas centrifuges in the Natanz facility for enriching uranium are currently operating. It is possible that these centrifuges are aimed at enriching the 20% lower enriched uranium to high enriched uranium in the event this decision is made.

Third, the purpose for building the recently-discovered Qom enrichment facility could be this very same purpose: high volume production of high enriched uranium in a short amount of time. Once Iran decides to continue with the military nuclear process it will be able to reach nuclear capability within several months.

Political analysis supports the argument that Iran chose to halt its nuclear race until it accomplishes its main foreign policy goal and becomes a stronger regional power. Upon gaining more control in the Middle East, Iran would be less susceptible to international sanctions and isolation, which it would almost certainly incur when it declares to have nuclear capability. To achieve greater supremacy in the Middle East, time favors the Iranian nuclear strategy and works against Iran's two main adversaries: the US and Israel.

The US plans on withdrawing its troops from Iraq by the end of 2010 and begin pulling out troops from Afghanistan in 2011. Both are Iran's neighbors. After the American withdrawal, Iran can increase its influence in the weak regimes of these countries, especially within the Shi'ite population of Iraq. Furthermore, it will have more time to strengthen its ties with Syria and Lebanon (via Hezbollah) and continue weakening Saudi Arabia by supporting Shi'ite Yemeni rebels. It will continue developing its bilateral relations with Qatar, home of the most influential Arab language television network – Al-Jazeera – and of one of the largest American military bases in the Middle East.

The Iranian strategy towards Israel also gains more leverage as time goes by. From the Israeli perspective, time is of the essence in stopping Iran before it reaches nuclear capability and poses a threat to Israeli's existence. Iranian leaders intentionally exacerbate the possible threat by using Holocaust-related rhetoric, putting pressure on the Israeli public and decision-makers to act before it's too late. **Iran's real interest lies not in launching a nuclear attack on Israel but in weakening Israel by creating an illusory nuclear threat and provoking an undue Israeli strike.**

An attack on Iranian nuclear facilities may stall the Iranian nuclear program, but it would cost Israel dearly. A unilateral attack would breach Israel-US trust (the Americans are opposed to such a measure), as well as result in further international isolation of Israel for violating Iranian sovereignty without any solid evidence. Moreover, Israel would suffer international repercussions for the radioactive fallout and whatever resultant civilian and environmental damage. The Iranian regime could also use the Israeli attack to assuage recent anti-government sentiments by uniting Iranians around the flag and singling Israel out as the universal Iranian foe. Iran would then have the international legitimacy to retaliate with an attack by Hezbollah or Syria, and could perhaps do so while a significant part of the Israeli Air Force is away from home. In the attack's aftermath, Iran could chose to slowly rebuild its nuclear program in the name of self defense with international blessing.

It is therefore reasonable to believe that this nuclear strategy serves Iran's interest in becoming a regional power. **It is also plausible that Iran simply wishes to maintain a policy of nuclear ambiguity, similar to unofficial Israeli nuclear policy.** According to Kam and Asculai's article, the Israeli and American intelligence services share the idea that Iran currently stopped its race to construct a nuclear bomb. The question remains whether Israeli decision makers would rely on professional political analysis when deliberating on attacking Iran. Past experience, and the unexplained decision to distribute gas masks to Israeli civilians this March, could tell otherwise.