

Stop Iran or it'll be too late

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WHETHER Iran's turmoil ends up like the Prague Spring or the Velvet Revolution remains to be seen. But when all is said and done, Iran's nuclear program will still be there. If, as one can anticipate, Iran's regime moves in to repress popular dissent and impose its iron fist on its restive population, it will be hard for the international community to engage the rulers of Iran as if nothing happened.

It will be even harder to make the case that Iran's quest for nuclear power can be excused, trusted, understood or explained away. The protests that are violently shaking the foundations of the Islamic Republic mean that if this regime survives, its cruelty will not confine itself to crushing the innocent at home. Iran's actions abroad will be just as bloody. What is to be done then?

Policy-makers in the West may look apprehensively at the scenes of carnage and hope and wish Iran's protesters will have it their way. After all, a successful democratic revolution would most likely bring an end to the nuclear stand-off. We can surely hope that democracy will triumph and pray that Iran's future democratic leaders will offer transparency on the country's nuclear past and safeguards on its future in a way that this regime never did and never would. But we must have a plan B, one that can be implemented if the hopes of young Iranians are drowned in their blood. Much depends on how we answer a simple question. How soon will it be too late to stop Iran's nuclear program?

Analysts and government officials routinely offer different timelines for an Iranian bomb, but they tend to put Iran's breakout capacity a few years away. Iran is experiencing significant technological difficulties and the political decision to go for the bomb may not have been made yet. It does not mean that Iran does not intend to build a nuclear arsenal over time. But testing a nuclear device comes with a price. Iran is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Crossing the nuclear threshold for a rudimentary nuclear device that Iran may not yet be able to replicate or deliver

will be costly and fall short of achieving the strategic goals Iran is pursuing through its nuclear program: the survival of the Islamic Revolution and its rise as the regional hegemon.

Tactically, therefore, Iran may prefer to wait until it has accumulated enough weapons-grade fissile material to build not one but dozens of bombs; until it can build a nuclear device that is small enough to fit into a missile warhead; and until it has perfected its ballistic missile technology to the point where a long-range missile can accurately hit a distant target. That time line is quite long; years, not months.

However, it is not the time line that matters for policy-makers. For long before Iran has accumulated enough fissile material to build an arsenal and enough technological know-how to turn it into deliverable warheads, it will have mastered the technology and cracked the scientific secrets needed to reach that goal. It is the difference between knowing how to ride a bicycle and owning one. The regime is closer to the former than the latter, but once the knowledge is there it will be harder to halt the march to the real thing.

Thus, this time line - shorter, though perhaps still some years away - matters more than the actual moment when Iran will break away from the NPT, build several warheads, mount them on missiles and threaten its neighbours. But even this time line is not the one that policy-makers must rely on for their planning. For long before Iran has built its arsenal or acquired the necessary knowledge, it will have shielded dozens of clandestine installations from a possible military strike.

Iran knows that military planners in Israel and the US constantly update their contingency plans for a strike based on fresh intelligence. The more Iran spreads its program, the more it hides it behind an impenetrable shield of defences and fortifications, the harder the job for those in the West tasked with devising a realistic plan of attack. At some point, they will tell the US and Israeli leaders that a military strike to retard or destroy Iran's nuclear program is no longer an option.

From then onward, Iran's run to nuclear capability will be unhindered. The removal of a credible military threat from the arsenal of diplomatic tools available to the international community will considerably reduce its leverage over Iran's regime. Whereas the nuclear clock may be still ticking slow enough to give us time, Iran's efforts to make its program untouchable are less burdened by scientific challenges: that clock is ticking much faster. Tehran will get there long before it can threaten anyone with a deliverable nuclear weapon. Once that happens - months, not years - the game turns to our disadvantage.

As events unfold in Iran, Western leaders must realise that time is fast running out. Now is the time to dramatically increase pressure on Iran. Its brutal repression gives us a cover for enacting extensive sanctions, withdrawing businesses and threatening isolation. This may not help street protests in Iran but it won't hinder them either, and it just may hurt Iran's rulers enough that they could reconsider their calculus.