

## GENEVA TALKS: IRAN, THE WEST, AND ‘MEDIA TERRORISM’\*

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The deck was at long last cleared for Iran to hold formal negotiations with the so-called P5+1 group of countries – the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council; the United States, China, Russia, the U.K. and France; plus Germany – on October 1, 2009, in Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> The final decision to that effect was reportedly taken during a telephonic talk between Javier Solana, the European Union foreign policy chief who has been representing the six powers in the protracted efforts at opening talks with Tehran, and Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, on September 14.<sup>2</sup>

The omission of the subject matter of the then proposed talks in our opening paragraph above is deliberate. If one were to go by what has over the past several months become the set pattern of Western media reporting on the prospects of the highly contentious matter of formal, announced interaction between the two relevant sides, the very title of this piece of writing would surely have included the theme of Iran’s controversial nuclear programme.

### ‘Nuclear’ talks

In other words, whenever someone in authority in Tehran has during this period given the slightest hint of his country’s readiness to enter into official discussions with the group of the six major powers, the Western news agencies as also publications have been quick in giving it the twist of Iran’s preparedness to negotiate on its nuclear activities. Nothing has been farther from the truth: even the most careful reading and rereading of the given Iranian statement would find the term “nuclear programme” conspicuous in its absence.

The reason has not been far to seek. It was way back in September 2008 that Iran’s then representative to the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Ali-Asghar Soltaniyeh, had declared emphatically: “The U.S. and Western countries have to cope with new realities: that Iran is the master of nuclear enrichment technology and at the same time Iran is cooperating with the agency.”<sup>3</sup>

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\* This paper takes into account the relevant developments till October 13, 2009.

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Of course, the context had then been the Western insistence that Iran cease its nuclear enrichment work and fully implement the relevant Security Council resolutions before talks could be held between the two sides. The Iranian diplomat had therefore spoken with reference to such preconditions: “Soltaniyeh said Iran’s transparent cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and its readiness for negotiations about its nuclear programme without any precondition has ‘disarmed the U.S. administration’. ‘Iran has spared no effort to prove to the world’ that it is ‘determined to sit at the negotiations table without any precondition.’”<sup>4</sup>

Such readiness of Iran to discuss its nuclear programme with the P5+1 countries, however, changed in April 2009 when Tehran started saying that it was working on a “package” of global issues to take up with the concerned powers. We shall see below what had changed on the ground for Iran to alter its stance on the proposed talks. Meanwhile, just to illustrate the point made above regarding the Western media’s propensity to insinuate Iran’s preparedness to enter into a dialogue solely on its nuclear programme, note may be taken of one such glaring instance in May 2009.

A *Reuters* despatch filed from Tehran on May 23 by its reporter Zahra Hosseiniyan proclaimed in the headline: “Iran says powers agree to *nuclear talks after vote*” (emphasis added). The same misstatement was repeated in the introductory paragraph of the story: “Iran has told world powers including the United States talks on its nuclear programme must wait until after the Islamic Republic’s presidential election on June 12, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Saturday.”<sup>5</sup>

It was only after five paragraphs of the news agency’s own representation of the background that the report got down to actually quoting the Iranian president on the matter. As it was, the word “nuclear” did not occur even once in his statement: “We said we will have no talks before the election. They were insisting to hold negotiations before the election,”<sup>6</sup> Ahmadinejad told a news conference for Iranian media broadcast live and translated by Iran’s English-language *Press TV*.

“They called several times ... and Mr Obama finally accepted and said Ok, let’s do it after the election,’ he said. Ahmadinejad said last month Iran had prepared its own proposals to end the stalemate. ‘That package of ours is prepared and we will send it to them soon,’ he said on Saturday, saying it was based on ‘clear-cut principles accepted by all wise people’ but giving no details.”

The Iranian leader ruled out the possibility of his country's engagement with the P5+1 exclusively on the nuclear issue even more emphatically just three days later. Mercifully, his remarks were this time reported without a slant by Qatar's daily *The Peninsula*: "Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday ruled out any talks with world powers on Tehran's nuclear drive ...

"We have said this before and we are saying it right now, that we will not talk about the nuclear issue with those outside the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency)," he told journalists of international news organisations. 'The Iranian nation will not allow anyone outside the IAEA to discuss our nuclear issue,' said Ahmadinejad, who is running for a second term in office in next month's presidential election. 'The nuclear issue is over for us. The talks outside the IAEA will only be about participation in the management of the world and bringing peace to the world,' he said."<sup>7</sup>

### **Electoral issue**

Before approaching the reason for this changed Iranian stance, it may be noted in passing that perhaps what endeared the major challenger and loser to President Ahmadinejad in the June 2009 elections, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, most to the Western powers was his continued readiness to hold further talks with the P5+1 on his country's nuclear programme despite such a categorical rejection of the possibility by the incumbent government at Tehran as noted above.

In a despatch filed from Tehran just four days after President Ahmadinejad's clearly stated position against further talks in this regard, Parisa Hafezi of *Reuters* noted the contradictory stand of Mir-Hossein Mousavi on the issue: "Iran's leading moderate candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi said Friday he would continue talks with major powers on his country's disputed nuclear activities if he won the June presidential vote. Mousavi's remarks contradicted hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his main challenger in the June 12 race, who on Monday ruled out any nuclear talks with the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany and Britain.

"If elected as Iran's president, I will continue nuclear talks with the P5+1 group," Mousavi told a news conference, where he was asked about Ahmadinejad's rejection of such talks... Hoping to win votes from reformers and conservatives, the former prime minister derides Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, saying he will adopt a conciliatory policy toward the West unlike his 'extremist' rival, who seeks a re-election in June.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever Mir-Hossein Mousavi's expectations may have been, there is every reason to believe that such derision of President Ahmadinejad and the challenger's conciliatory attitude on Iran's nuclear programme may in the event have contributed in no small measure to his humiliating defeat in elections. For, all credible evidence points to the incumbent president's widespread popularity among his compatriots on the one hand, and an overwhelming national consensus in Iran on the pursuit of the country's perfectly legitimate right to exploit nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

### **Mastering the fuel cycle**

Meanwhile, President Ahmadinejad's rejection of further nuclear talks had anything but pleased the Western powers as well: "A senior Western diplomat told *Reuters* Friday that Ahmadinejad's comments have disappointed the major powers, which are trying to engage Iran diplomatically to end the standoff. 'We want to see a positive sign from Iran and rejecting nuclear talks altogether is not a positive sign at all,' said the diplomat, who requested not to be identified."<sup>9</sup>

At any rate, Iran had over the past several months marked sufficient progress in its nuclear programme so as to tell the West that there was no longer any reason left for it to negotiate on this score. In the first place, Tehran had continued to increase the number of centrifuges in operation. The figure saw an increase of some 1,000 between August and November 2008. The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation declared on November 27 that more than 5,000 uranium enrichment centrifuges were now in operation, as against about 4,000 reported in late August.<sup>10</sup>

However, the more significant development in Iran's nuclear programme had been with regard to the long-delayed project of the nuclear reactor at the Bushehr plant that Russia has been in the process of constructing. The head of Russia's State Nuclear Corporation declared in early February 2009 that this first Iranian nuclear power plant along the country's south-western Gulf coast would at long last start functioning by the end of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Given the frequent delays that the project has suffered in the past, this Russian announcement may again have been received with scepticism by some observers. However, the plant did go into test operations on February 26 which were expected to run for several months before it could be fully operationalised before the yearend. "The visiting head of the Russian nuclear agency, Sergei Kiriyenko, said the construction of the

1,000-megawatt plant had been completed but that Russia would remain involved for one year after it goes on stream.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, on April 10, 2009, marking Iran’s ‘National Nuclear Day’, Tehran declared that it had mastered the entire nuclear fuel cycle. It also announced that the number of centrifuges now in operation had risen to 7,000: “Iran announced further progress in its nuclear programme on Thursday in a move likely to arouse fresh Western concern a day after world powers said they would invite Tehran to direct talks on the row. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, saying Tehran was ready for negotiations if they were based on respect and justice, said Iran had mastered the nuclear fuel cycle and it had also tested new, more advanced machines for enriching uranium.

“Speaking at the same televised event to mark Iran’s National Nuclear Day, the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, Gholomreza Aghazadeh, said it was now running 7,000 enrichment centrifuges. In February, Iran had said the number was 6,000....

“I sincerely congratulate the Iranian nation ... for the great success ... in completing the fuel management cycle,’ Ahmadinejad said. The nuclear fuel cycle includes mining of uranium ore, uranium enrichment, fabrication and use of nuclear fuel, reprocessing of used fuel, and disposal of radioactive waste...

“Ahmadinejad also said Iran had tested two new types of uranium enrichment centrifuges with a capacity ‘a few times higher than the existing centrifuges’ currently in use. Up to now, Iran has been enriching with only a fragile, inefficient 1970s vintage machine known as the P-1 ... ‘The Iranian nation ... is a nation that would achieve what it wants despite enmities and enemies,’ Ahmadinejad said.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it was against such a backdrop of marked progress in its nuclear quest that President Ahmadinejad declared the following month that there was nothing left for Iran to talk about on the question with its P5+1 interlocutors. It may not be out of place to mention here the particular pride the nation of Iran would take in its mastery of chess – the game of patience and anticipation believed to have been invented by their predecessors. However, what is even more pertinent is the compliment in this regard accorded Iran recently by its arch rival Israel.

## **Chess masters**

The Speaker of Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, had of course advised the United States even earlier, on February 14, 2009, to turn to chess instead of boxing in its dealings with the Islamic Republic: "In the past the United States has violated Iranian rights. It has to change its attitude regarding the Iranian people. The United States has to play chess, not box."<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, it was striking when the Israeli Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, also acknowledged the success of Iranian diplomacy on the nuclear score through the metaphor of chess. No less significant was the timing of the Israeli tribute – after Iran had declared its success in running the entire nuclear fuel cycle, but before the country had rejected further talks. *AFP* quoted Barak's relevant remarks from Jerusalem on April 28:

"Iran is using the skill and sophistication of a master chess player in its controversial nuclear drive, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said in an interview published on Tuesday. 'The Iranians don't play backgammon, they play chess and in fact they invented the game,' Barak, himself an avid chess player, said in an interview with *Haaretz* newspaper, referring to the Islamic republic's atomic programme. 'They are proceeding with far greater sophistication and are far more methodical,' the minister said in the interview."<sup>15</sup>

As already noted, Iran had in May declined to resume talks with the P5+1 group of countries till after its presidential elections the following month. However, the acrimony that ensued between Tehran and some of the Western capitals, Paris and London in particular, over the harsh criticism by the latter of the conduct of those elections, their results in the form of President Ahmadinejad's convincing victory and Iran's handling of the post-poll violence on its streets, appeared for some time to make the prospects of the proposed talks highly doubtful.<sup>16</sup>

### **Renewed offer**

Nevertheless, the Western powers did eventually come to terms with the reality of their having to deal with a re-elected President Ahmadinejad as no convincing evidence of either serious poll irregularities or unduly harsh treatment of the protesters could be brought forward by the losing candidates in Iran. President Obama thus gave out another call for Iran to come to the negotiating table a month after the elections by when the dust had more or less settled on the post-poll upheaval in that country.

Although Obama stopped short of sounding an ultimatum to Iran regarding the date by when the talks must resume, he did tell reporters

after meeting with other world leaders in Italy on July 21 that there was now a September “time frame” for the purpose. “While he did not call it a deadline, he said the world cannot afford to wait long for Iran to make its intentions clear. ‘We’re not going to just wait indefinitely and allow for the development of the nuclear weapon,’ he said.

“Obama said that in September ‘we will re-evaluate Iran’s posture toward negotiating the cessation of a nuclear weapons policy.’ If by then it has not accepted the offer of talks, the United States and ‘potentially a lot of other countries’ are going to say ‘we need to take further steps,’ he said. The president did not say what steps he has in mind. He mentioned neither sanctions nor military force. But it seems clear that a next step to pressure Iran would entail some form of sanctions.”<sup>17</sup>

Iran responded to President Obama’s statement the next day by repeating that it was still working on a new “package” of “political, security and international” issues to discuss with the P5+1 group of countries. Significantly, again, the word “nuclear” continued to be absent from the reported official remarks by Tehran on this occasion as well: “‘The package can be a good basis for talks with the West. The package will contain Iran’s stances on political, security and international issues,’ Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told a news conference.”<sup>18</sup>

It is at the same time also significant that the Iranian foreign minister had singled out the “West” as the addressee of the new proposals his country was working on, even though the interlocutors in this case grouped under the label of P5+1 included China and Russia as well. That was for good reason. Both these major global powers in Iran’s neighbourhood have ever since the start of the controversy surrounding Tehran’s nuclear programme some seven years ago, continued to disfavour either the imposition of harsh sanctions on the country or, even more forcefully, the use of force against it.

In early September, the P5+1 group of countries gave out a call to Iran for a meeting to be held between the two sides before the start of the U.N. General Assembly session in New York later the same month. Iran reiterated its position that its nuclear programme could not form part of any such future discussions:

“A senior Iranian official was quoted by a State-run television website on Thursday [September 3] as suggesting any talks with world powers would not address the Islamic Republic’s nuclear programme. The comments by Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran’s envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, were published a day after world powers pressed Iran to

meet them for talks on the nuclear dispute before a U.N. General Assembly meeting this month. ‘It is wrong to think that possible talks with (the six world powers) would be about Iran’s nuclear programme,’ Soltanieh was quoted as saying by the website of *Al-Alam*, a state-run television station. ‘Iran’s nuclear issue can only be examined at the International Atomic Energy Agency,’ he said...

“Soltanieh said Tehran ‘was always ready to cooperate’ with the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency to remove any doubts about its nuclear programme ... Citing Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, Soltanieh said ‘international cooperation, energy security and global disarmament’ were among international and regional topics that could be raised in discussions with the world powers.”<sup>19</sup>

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeated the same position of his country even more forcefully at a news conference the following week: “Iran’s president has ruled out any discussion of its ‘undeniable’ right to nuclear energy, but proposed talks with global powers on its peaceful use... Mr Ahmadinejad said deadlines were ‘incompatible’ with the world’s needs. ‘From our point of view, Iran’s nuclear issue is finished. We continue our work within the framework of global regulations and in close interaction with the International Atomic Energy Agency,’ he said. ‘We will never negotiate over the undeniable rights of the Iranian nation.’ He said Iran’s co-operation with the international community would follow two tracks, developing clean atomic energy for peaceful purposes and preventing a proliferation of nuclear weapons.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Iran’s package**

Finally, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki handed over the highly anticipated package to diplomatic representatives of Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and Switzerland (on behalf of the United States, as there are no diplomatic relations between Tehran and Washington, D.C.) in the Iranian capital on September 9. “We hope that we can organize a new round of negotiations within the framework of the new package,’ Iran’s State-owned *Press TV* news agency cited Mottaki as saying two days ago.”<sup>21</sup>

True to its word, Iran made no mention of its nuclear programme in the five-page document that was later published on the web by a U.S.-based investigative journalism group, ProPublica.org.<sup>22</sup> Among the “predicaments facing our world today”, Iran had enumerated “the unprecedented economic crisis, cultural and identity crisis, political and security dilemmas, and the mushrooming of terrorism, organised crimes and the illicit drugs.”

In this regard, the package noted that the “resolution of these problems and creating a world filled with spirituality, friendship, prosperity, wellness and security requires reorganisation and creating an opportunity for broad and collective participation in the management of the world.

“The existing mechanisms are not capable to meet the present needs of humankind and their ineffectiveness has been clearly proven in the realms of economy, politics, culture and security. These mechanisms and structures are the direct products of relations based on brute power and domination, while our world today needs mechanisms that come from divine and godly thinking and an approach based on human values and compassion. The new mechanisms should pave the way for the advancement, full blossoming of the talents and potentials of all nations and establishment of lasting world peace and security.

“The Iranian nation is prepared to enter into dialogue and negotiation in order to lay the ground for lasting peace and regionally inspired and generated stability for the region and beyond and for the continued progress and prosperity of the nations of the region and the world.”

After some further elaboration of the premises, the package went on to list three broad areas in which “the Islamic Republic of Iran voices its readiness to embark on comprehensive, all-encompassing and constructive negotiations.” The three categories included 1) political-security issues, 2) international issues, and 3) economic issues. Two of the heads in the classification of international issues addressed the nuclear question, albeit in a global framework:

“2.5 Promoting a rule-based and equitable oversight function of the IAEA and creating the required mechanisms for use of clean nuclear energy in agriculture, industry, and medicine and power generation.

“2.6 Promoting the universality of NPT, mobilising global resolve and putting into action real and fundamental programmes toward complete disarmament and preventing development and proliferation of nuclear, chemical and microbial weapons.”

Through placing this package on the table for the proposed talks with the six major powers, Iran had effectively put its interlocutors in checkmate, to revert to the metaphor of chess. The United States in particular found itself in a dilemma. There was, after all, nothing exceptional about anything in the Iranian package, but it just did not incorporate anything about the country’s nuclear programme.

To further add to the woes of America, Samareh Hashemi, President Ahmadinejad's "top political aide" and "long-time confidant" explained to Thomas Erdbrink of *The Washington Post* in Tehran that Iran's proposal on the nuclear question was in fact "similar to a call by President Obama in April to eliminate the nuclear weapons." Indeed, as noted by the newspaper, "Later this month, Obama is scheduled to chair a special session of the U.N. General Assembly's annual meeting aimed at seeking consensus on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, rather than targeting individual nations such as Iran and North Korea."<sup>23</sup>

### **Western response**

However, contrary to the projection by the well-informed U.S. daily, *Washington Post*, President Obama did in fact choose to target Iran and Korea in his U.N. speech on September 23. That, however, seemed to fall within the context of both the United States and Iran trying to increase pressure on each other ahead of the October 1 talks to improve their respective negotiating positions.

Meanwhile, Russia was the first of the concerned six major powers to give a positive response to the Iranian package. Janet McBride of *Reuters* reported from Moscow on September 10: "'Based on a brief review of the Iranian papers my impression is there is something there to use,' [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei] Lavrov told academics and reporters from the Valdai discussion group in Moscow. 'The most important thing is Iran is ready for a comprehensive discussion of the situation, what positive role it can play in Iraq, Afghanistan and the region,' he said..."

"Lavrov said he opposed setting deadlines. 'Such a comprehensive approach by the six powers and Iran's readiness to discuss is something. But negotiations cannot be finished by a set date,' he said."<sup>24</sup>

The United States, on the other hand, was understandably less enthused: "'It's not really responsive to our greatest concern, which is obviously Iran's nuclear programme,' State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said of Tehran's package of proposals. 'Iran reiterated its view that as far as it is concerned, its nuclear file is closed. . . . That is certainly not the case. There are many outstanding issues.' But Crowley did not shut the door completely. He said the United States was consulting with its negotiating partners – Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany. 'We'll be looking to see how ready Iran is to actually engage, and we will be testing that willingness to engage in the next few weeks,' he said."

"A senior administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the administration had determined it would not reject the package out of hand but would see whether there were elements that could form the basis for substantive talks. The written offer notably did not include criticism of the United States."<sup>25</sup>

The United States and the other five countries included in the negotiating group did not thereafter take long in communicating their readiness to engage with Iran. Just two days after the issuing of the Iranian proposals, it was announced that a meeting between the two sides would be held at the earliest:

"The decision to take up Iran's offer was communicated publicly Friday [September 11] in Brussels, Belgium, by Javier Solana, the European Union foreign policy chief who is an intermediary for the six powers. They represent the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany. 'We are all committed to meaningful negotiations with Iran to resolve the international community's concerns about their nuclear programme,' Solana said in a brief written statement. He said his office was in contact with Iranian officials to arrange a meeting 'at the earliest possible opportunity.'"<sup>26</sup>

The next day, the U.S. State Department outlined what could be described as its terms of engagement with Iran: "Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told reporters that although Iran's proposal for international talks — presented to the six nations on Wednesday — was disappointing for sidestepping the nuclear issue, it represented a chance to begin a direct dialogue. 'We are seeking a meeting now based on the Iranian paper to see what Iran is prepared to do,' Crowley said. 'And then, as the president has said, you know, if Iran responds to our interest in a meeting, we'll see when that can occur. We hope that will occur as soon as possible.'..."

"Crowley said Iran's lack of interest in addressing its nuclear programme is not a reason to refuse to talk. 'If we have talks, we will plan to bring up the nuclear issue,' he said. 'So we are seeking a meeting because ultimately the only way that we feel we're going to be able to resolve these issues is to have a meeting,' Crowley added. 'But it's not just a meeting for meeting's sake; it is a meeting to be able to see if Iran is willing to engage us seriously on these issues.'"<sup>27</sup>

Having vindicated its stance on the non-negotiability of its nuclear programme, Iran, too, opted to show some flexibility. In an apparent reference to the U.S. State Department's expressed intent of bringing up

the nuclear issue during the proposed talks, Tehran declared on September 14 after the announcement of the opening of negotiations on October 1 that members of the P5+1 would be “free to pose any questions”: “There is no room to bargain on (our) sovereign right but once it comes to discussions, everybody is free to pose any questions they wish,’ Ali Akbar Salehi, head of Iran’s nuclear energy agency, told reporters on the sidelines of the U.N. atomic agency’s annual meeting of 150 member States.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Upping the ante**

The next fortnight till the holding of the agreed meeting witnessed a number of moves and manoeuvres by both the United States and Iran aimed at upping the ante before their Geneva meeting. The first shot to that end was fired by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton just two days later with her insistence on Iran’s addressing the nuclear issue “head on”:

“U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said Iran must answer ‘head on’ concerns about its nuclear programme at talks with world powers on 1 October. Mrs Clinton said the issue ‘cannot be ignored’ and was the key reason why the U.S. agreed to take part in the talks... ‘We have made clear to the Iranians that any talks we participate in must address the nuclear issue head on,’ Mrs Clinton said in Washington. ‘Iran says it has a number of issues it wishes to discuss with us but what we are concerned about is discussing with them the questions surrounding their nuclear programme and ambitions. We will wait to see how Iran responds in that face-to-face venue,’ America’s top diplomat said.”<sup>29</sup>

Iran hit back through the first public display of its homemade ballistic missile, solid-fuel Sejil 2 with a range of 2,000 kms – enough to reach Israel and U.S. military forces in the region – in a military parade on September 22. Iran had announced its successful launch in May. “The show at the beginning of the country’s Week of Holy Defence marks Iranian sacrifices during the eight years of Iraqi war on Iran in the 1980s.”<sup>30</sup> Falling within the pre-planned annual ceremonies, Iran’s show of strength was only coincidental to the upcoming Geneva talks, but the launch of the missile at this stage was bound to impact the atmosphere ahead of the negotiations.

A day earlier, Iran had made a move that, in terms of its real and present impact on the key global economic interests of the United States, was bound to be more harmful than its mere muscle flexing in the form of launching the intermediate-range Sajil 2 ballistic missile. The U.S. dollar, which President Ahmadinejad had earlier called a “worthless piece of

paper”,<sup>31</sup> was replaced by the euro in Iran’s calculating the value of its Oil Stabilisation Fund (OSF). “State radio said the move was taken because the government wished to protect itself from the fragility of the U.S. economy and the weak dollar...”

“The OSF, which forms part of Iran’s foreign exchange reserves, is a contingency fund set aside by the government to cushion the economy against fluctuating international oil prices and help both the public and private sectors with their hard currency needs by extending loans. The sizes of the OSF and the overall foreign exchange reserves are not regularly revealed to the public. Ahmadinejad said last December that the OSF was worth the equivalent of over \$23 billion, and State television reported at the time that the reserves exceeded \$80 billion.

“The decision on calculating the OSF is the latest in a series of efforts by Iran, which is diplomatically hostile to the United States, to reduce the role of the dollar in its economy. Iran has pushed for the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to switch from the dollar when calculating international oil prices, though it has so far received little support for the initiative.”<sup>32</sup>

In a recall to the Western assault on Iraq, Robert Fisk was to draw an ominous parallel to this Iranian move in *The Independent* a fortnight later: “Iran announced late last month that its foreign currency reserves would henceforth be held in euros rather than dollars. Bankers remember, of course, what happened to the last Middle East oil producer to sell its oil in euros rather than dollars. A few months after Saddam Hussein trumpeted his decision, the Americans and British invaded Iraq.”<sup>33</sup>

Over to the United States: President Obama declared in his speech at the U.N. General Assembly the next day that Iran as also North Korea “must be held accountable” for their nuclear programmes. “I am committed to diplomacy that opens a path to greater prosperity and a more secure peace for both nations if they live up to their obligations. But if the governments of Iran and North Korea ... are oblivious to the dangers of escalating nuclear arms races in both East Asia and the Middle East, then they must be held accountable.”<sup>34</sup>

Iran announced the same day that it had developed a new generation of centrifuges and was in the process of testing them. “Iranian scientists have made a new generation of centrifuges that are currently undergoing necessary tests,’ [head of the country’s nuclear energy agency] Ali Akbar Salehi told a Tehran news conference as reported by IRNA. “Chains of 10 centrifuges are now under test,’ he said, and the number in each chain ‘will

be gradually increased.' Salehi did not say when the new model of centrifuge would be introduced to the production line in its Natanz enrichment plant but said it was stronger and faster than those now in operation."<sup>35</sup>

### A humanitarian need

It was now President Ahmadinejad's turn to put the United States on the defensive. On September 23, even as he offered to let his country's nuclear experts meet scientists from America and other world powers as a confidence-building measure, Ahmadinejad announced that Tehran would seek to buy from the United States enriched uranium for medical purposes at the forthcoming Geneva talks.

"These nuclear materials we are seeking to purchase are for medicinal purposes... It is a humanitarian issue,' Ahmadinejad said in the interview [with editors and reporters from the *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* at the United Nations]. 'I think this is a very solid proposal which gives a good opportunity for a start' to build trust between the two countries and 'engage in cooperation.' Nuclear research reactors are used to create radioactive isotopes for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. The Iranian president said that about 20 medical products are created at a reactor in Tehran but that more fuel is needed...

"Iran's medical reactor was supplied by the United States during the shah's rule. But according to David Albright, a former weapons inspector who is president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, Iran received additional uranium only from Argentina after the 1979 revolution. Argentina cut off those supplies sometime in the 1980s.

"Albright said Iran's latest move is 'clever' because there is 'implied blackmail' behind the idea. If the material is not supplied, Iran could announce that it has no choice but to make the material, which is nearly 20 per cent enriched; the material Iran is now producing is three to five per cent enriched and suitable only for energy purposes. Allowing Iran to purchase the new material would require a waiver of international sanctions.

"While weapons-grade material is more than 90 per cent enriched, making material for the medical reactor could put Iran on the next step to reaching that level. Albright said the proposal to make Iran's nuclear experts available to answer questions from international scientists is also potentially significant because Iran has not previously allowed such a meeting, even in an unofficial setting."<sup>36</sup>



## The handy terrorists

On September 24, the Paris-based *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* organisation (known to the Western world as the National Council of Resistance of Iran, or NCRI), an exiled Iranian group on the U.S. terrorist list, came up with a claim out of the blue that Tehran was working on two secret sites to develop high-explosive detonators for use in atomic bombs.<sup>37</sup> The timing of this unsubstantiated claim by the group, which till earlier this year was designated as a terrorist outfit by the E.U. as well till its being legalised for obvious political reasons, was highly ominous.

It would be worth recalling here that a similarly dubious announcement about Iran's 'secret nuclear work' made by the NCRI in the U.S. capital on August 14, 2002, had provided the pretext for the launch of the aggressive Western campaign against Tehran on this count that has failed more than seven years later to substantiate the terrorist organisation's accusation.

While reporting on this supposed 'disclosure' by the terrorist outfit's representative in 2002, the *Associated Press* had taken note of certain ironical aspects of the development: "[Alireza] Jafarzadeh's group, based in Paris, is a government-in-exile that advocates violent overthrow of the religious government that rules Iran. Officials say they want to install a democratic government in Iran that protects human rights. The group has been labelled a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, but this didn't prevent it from holding a press conference in a posh Washington hotel two blocks from the White House on Wednesday [August 14].

"The State Department accuses the group of being the same as the 'People's Mujahideen' or *Mujahideen-e-Khalq*, which it alleges has Marxist sympathies and killed several Americans in Iran in the 1970s. A significant number within the U.S. Congress have supported removing the group's terrorist designation because it opposes the Iranian government. Jafarzadeh said the U.S. government first put his group on the list in 1997 to appease moderate elements within the Iranian government

"It also receives support from the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein, an enemy of the government of Iran, according to the State Department, which also says both Iraq and Iran are supporters of terrorism. 'It's a terrorist organization. It's listed as such, designated as a foreign terrorist organization under U.S. law,' State Department spokesman Philip T. Reeker said Wednesday. He referred questions about the group's U.S. operations to the Justice Department, which had no immediate comment."<sup>38</sup>

Although the Western powers have not so far picked up on this latest ‘disclosure’ by the NCRI as fresh grounds to hound Iran, such a possibility cannot be ruled out in future in view of exactly such a use that the terrorist organisation was put to in 2002. Terrorists, too, it seems, can come in handy as impeccable witnesses when all else fails the law-abiding West in making a case against any non-compliant State.

### The Qom plant

For now, the United States, Britain and France chose instead to utilise the contrived premise of Iran’s hiding yet another nuclear facility that Tehran had duly informed the IAEA about. The sequence of events in this regard was as follows:

On Monday, September 21, Iran wrote to the IAEA in Vienna that it was constructing a new uranium enrichment facility near Qom: “Iran acknowledged the existence of the facility for the first time on Monday in a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Ali Akbar Salehi, chief of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, presented the facility as new, saying the country had achieved a ‘successful new step in the direction of preserving and enjoying its accepted right for peaceful use of nuclear energy.’ He said Iran was ‘now in the process of building a semi-industrial plant for enriching nuclear fuel,’ according to the *IRNA* news agency. ‘The activities of this facility, like other nuclear facilities in Iran, will be in the framework of the measures of the agency (IAEA),’ he said.”<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Iran had not only informed the IAEA about the new facility on September 21, but also undertaken to open it for inspection by the Agency. The same news report by Western sources as cited above also carried the confirmation by the IAEA: “The IAEA asked Iran to provide access to and information about the plant as soon as possible. IAEA spokesman Marc Vidricaire said Iran had stated that it intended to enrich uranium at the new plant, like its Natanz complex, only to the five per cent level suitable for power plant fuel. ‘The Agency also understands from Iran that no nuclear material has been introduced into the facility,’ he said.”<sup>40</sup>

Four days later, on Friday, September 25, “President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy accused Iran on Friday of constructing a secret underground uranium enrichment facility and of hiding its existence from international inspectors for years. The charges came at a meeting of the Group of 20 economic powers in Pittsburgh, and a week before direct talks with Tehran over its nuclear program.”<sup>41</sup>

Later the same day in New York, President Ahmadinejad strongly contested the Western accusation of secrecy: "Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Friday sternly denied charges by the United States, France and Britain that his government had sought to conceal a nuclear enrichment facility, insisting that Tehran had met its legal obligation to inform the U.N.'s key nuclear agency of its activities and that it had invited inspections of the facility. 'It's not a secret facility,' Ahmadinejad told reporters at a press conference at the Intercontinental Hotel. 'What we did was completely legal.' The Iranian president said his government had recently notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its plans to operate the new facility. He said the Vienna-based nuclear energy agency 'will come and take a look and produce a report and nothing new.'

...

"Ahmadinejad said that the United States and its European partners were seeking to exploit the latest nuclear revelation to turn the international community against Iran, and to strengthen their negotiation position on the eve of Oct. 1 nuclear talks. He said Obama's contention that the facility was not for peaceful purposes was not true. 'I don't think Mr Obama is a nuclear expert,' he said. 'We have to leave it to the IAEA and let the IAEA carry out its duty.'

"At the crux of the dispute between Iran and the West is a difference of opinion over Iran's obligation to notify the IAEA of its plan to build nuclear facilities. Ahmadinejad claims that Iran is not required to notify the IAEA of its intention to construct a nuclear facility until six months before it begins operation, citing a longstanding IAEA policy. The IAEA has persuaded most countries with the capacity to produce nuclear power to agree to notify the IAEA before they begin construction. Iran reached a similar agreement with the agency in 2003, but then withdrew from the accord four years later, when nuclear talks with the West collapsed. The IAEA maintains that Iran is still bound by that agreement, but that its failure to abide by it does not constitute a formal violation of its obligations, according to David Albright, a former U.N. nuclear inspector and now the head of the Institute for Science and International Security."<sup>42</sup>

In this context, the IAEA's position is, on the face of it, untenable. The agreement that the *The Washington Post* report cited above refers to, forms part of what are called "Safeguards Additional Protocols" by the IAEA which the Agency's Board has, indeed, approved in the case of as many as 136 countries.<sup>43</sup> These protocols provide for nuclear safeguards that are additional to those that are included in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Now, if a country signatory to the NPT itself is at liberty to renounce its adherence to the Treaty at any time – as has

been done by North Korea in 2003 – it defies logic to maintain that a State would be denied a similar right to opt out of the Additional Protocols after subscribing to them.

Nevertheless, the Western countries – particularly France, Britain and the United States, and in that order – and media were to make a cause celebre of the ‘secret’ Qom facility. A great deal of dust was also raised on how the ‘clandestine’ work had been kept hidden through conducting it deep in the mountains of Qom’s neighbourhood, even as Tehran took pains in explaining that “the country’s new enrichment site was built for maximum protection from aerial attack: carved into a mountain and near a military compound of the powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps.”<sup>44</sup>

Saeed Jalili later explained the same reason for the plant’s secure location: “Some are allowing themselves to threaten our legal facilities with military attack, and so we are going to come up with security measures for our nuclear facilities. One of them is that we need to have a facility for uranium enrichment with a higher level of security and that’s why we decided to establish the new facility that is under construction.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Media distortions**

The veracity of the mainstream Western media, especially that of the United States, in reporting and commenting on developments concerning Iran has often been called into questions by independent writers and commentators in different parts of the world including America, all the more so in recent times starting with the coverage of the June 12 presidential elections in that country.<sup>46</sup> We have also taken a brief look above on how the Western media continued to fabricate the premise of Iran’s preparedness to discuss its nuclear programme in the recent past.

A lot can be noted in the present context of the Qom nuclear facility as well, but we would confine ourselves here to referring to just a couple of pieces appearing in *The New York Times* that epitomise the tendency. Not only that; the newspaper in question happens to be the most widely read and influential daily in America. Being fed on such outright lies, it should be no surprise that the U.S. public opinion as also government policy is in many crucial cases formed on fallacious premises that can be detrimental not only to American national interest but also to global peace and security.

Whatever one is to make of the Iranian nuclear facility at Qom, it is beyond doubt that Tehran had informed the IAEA about its existence well before President Obama, Prime Minister Brown and President Sarkozy

referred to it at the G 20 summit meeting at Pittsburgh on September 25. Nevertheless, *The New York Times* took it upon itself to peddle the falsehood that it was not Iran but these three Western leaders who had “revealed” the “secret”.

In what can be described only as a sustained campaign a la Goebbels to repeat a lie so frequently that people come to believe in it, the newspaper started the drive immediately after the Pittsburgh event. Under the title of “The Big Cheat” that better described its own character than that of the intended Iran, *The New York Times* pontificated editorially on September 26 that “the new facility” had been “revealed on Friday [September 25] by President Obama and the leaders of France and Britain...”<sup>47</sup>

The daily then extended the realm of spreading the disinformation to its reporting as well. The story filed from Geneva by its correspondents Steven Erlanger and Mark Landler on talks between Iran and the P5+1 group of countries held there on October 1 stated, among other things, that “the United States” had “revealed the existence of the uranium enrichment site near Qom”<sup>48</sup> – significantly, the dubious credit for the achievement had for some reason been now withheld from Britain and France.

The day after the appearance of the above report, the newspaper carried an editorial on “Negotiating with Tehran”. But the restraint in language ended with the title to the piece. This particular write-up constitutes a marvel of brazen liberties with the truth which are too numerous to be reproduced and treated here. Suffice it to note that the line on the Qom facility was even more outlandish than the daily’s earlier references to it: “Of course, Iran didn’t even acknowledge that it was building a plant near Qom until last week after it was caught red-handed.”<sup>49</sup> Of course, this version would by now have been expected to be believed by at least *The New York Times* readers.

It was also claimed by the U.S. that the country had in fact known about the Qom facility “for years” before it was “revealed” by the American president on September 25. *The New York Times* was only too willing to tout the official position. Thus, its September 26 editorial cited in the foregoing had also advanced the same without substantiation: “[The new facility] has been under construction since 2006. Western officials said there was evidence of excavation, tunnelling and the infrastructure to accommodate the centrifuges used in enriching uranium. They estimated it could be operational in a few months.”<sup>50</sup>

However, in their keenness to malign Iran on this count, the relevant American officials and those in the media parroting the assertion remained oblivious to the fact that their contention implied U.S. culpability in its failure to report the construction of the facility to the IAEA at an earlier stage. The well-known investigative journalist, Pepe Escobar, has taken note of this aspect in a report published by *Asia Times*: "As for Washington, it might have known about this 'secret' plant during the George W Bush administration - as those usual suspects, 'senior officials', confirmed to U.S. corporate media. But that raises the question: why did Israel and the U.S. not expose it when it was 'secret', that is, still not reported to the IAEA?"<sup>51</sup>

Iran's dismay at this questionable role of the global leaders in journalism in the United States is entirely understandable. Credit must be given to the chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, for his coining the phrase of "media terrorism". He was reported to have employed the terminology, apparently without specific reference to any country, at his press conference at Geneva after the conclusion of the highly anticipated interaction between his country and the P5+1 on October 1.<sup>52</sup>

### The outcome

That reference by Jalili was cited by Glenn Kessler in his detailed report on the proceedings and outcome of the talks in *The Washington Post*. The same write-up described the Iranian official as being "triumphant" at the press conference. He had every reason to be so. The success of the Iranian side in this round of talks was acknowledged even by a number of observers within America.

Before approaching that aspect, it would be in order to list the decisions taken in the discussions. The most significant outcomes, as claimed by the West, were the Iranian agreement "to open its newly revealed uranium enrichment plant near Qom to international inspection in the next two weeks and to send most of its openly declared enriched uranium outside Iran to be turned into fuel for a small reactor that produces medical isotopes, senior American and other Western officials said."<sup>53</sup>

Leaving aside the seemingly unavoidable American media refrain of the "newly revealed" facility at Qom, there were some major problems with this opening line in *The New York Times* report, again. In the first place, the newspaper had conveniently forgotten that the question of Iran's agreeing to "open" this plant to "international inspection" could not possibly have been a topic at issue in these talks for the simple reason that Tehran had

itself undertaken to open it to inspection by the IAEA when it had first informed the Agency about its existence on September 21.

Secondly, Iran has rightly contended that its nuclear programme lies within the ambit of the IAEA and hence not open to discussion at other international forums, including the P5+1 platform. The international community as such can come in only if the IAEA refers the case of the Iranian nuclear programme to the United Nations Security Council as it indeed did on March 8, 2006<sup>54</sup> leading eventually to the imposition of the first round of sanctions on July 31 the same year.<sup>55</sup>

The reference to “international inspection” rather than inspection by the IAEA is, thus, misleading, to say the least. The IAEA, too, is certainly an international body in terms of its composition, but works as an independent watchdog organ of the United Nations. The individuals working for the Agency do not function as representatives of their respective countries but as part of the global U.N. network. Representatives of individual States, on the other hand, are elected periodically to the Executive Board of the IAEA and do function as the Agency staff.

However, the more mischievous assertion in the report – and one which was also carried by almost the entire Western media coverage of the Geneva talks – was that Tehran had agreed to the Qom plant inspection within “two weeks”. The date for the inspection had, at any rate, to be settled by Iran with the IAEA at Vienna and not with its P5+1 interlocutors at Geneva.

Apparently, what the media had done here was to introduce the deadline for the purpose which was to be set by President Obama later the same day in his response to the Geneva talks as a commitment by Iran. The American president stated in this regard: “It [Iran] must grant unfettered access to IAEA inspectors within two weeks.”<sup>56</sup> The United States should by now have come to know better than to dictate Iran by setting deadlines that are not met. As seen above, Russia, too, has cautioned America against such an approach.

Meanwhile, getting back to the U.S. media coverage of the Geneva talks, it seems not to have occurred to the zealous spin doctors that they were in fact casting the American president in poor light by making his ultimatum appear as something that Iran had already agreed to.

### **The deal that never was**

Finally, there is this question of the purported Iranian agreement “to send most of its openly declared enriched uranium outside Iran to be turned into fuel for a small reactor that produces medical isotopes.”<sup>57</sup> This dubious claim was much brandished as a major Western achievement as Iran would by shipping out most of low enriched uranium to Russia be deprived of using the same for further enrichment to make the bomb.

The difficulty with this account is that no word to that effect has so far come from Iran. On the contrary, Iran’s ambassador to Britain and a member of his country’s team to the Geneva talks stated categorically the following day that no such agreement had yet been made.<sup>58</sup> An IAEA spokesman also corroborated the same position. He stated that during his proposed visit to Iran for finalising the date for inspection of the Qom plant, Elbaradei would “also discuss a plan to allow Russia to take some of Iran’s processed uranium and enrich it to higher levels to fuel a research reactor in Tehran.”<sup>59</sup> The difference between the “most of” the uranium as claimed by the Western media and the “some of” it as declared by the IAEA is crucial.

However, the possibility of Iran’s exporting any of its low-enriched uranium to Russia, as it turned out, was a mere proposal floated by the IAEA at Geneva. All Iran did was to agree with it “in principle” but made no firm commitment. The U.S. president was on record to have stated that much in his response to the talks: “Obama also said he backed an IAEA proposal, which he said was agreed to in principle by Tehran, for Iran to transfer low-enriched uranium to a third country for fuel fabrication, a step he called a confidence-building step.”<sup>60</sup>

The Western media conduct here with regard to Iran in particular falls into a pattern long adhered to it for even reporting facts that, once upon a time, were held sacred. The scheme is to attribute falsehoods to Iran or concerning Iran – as we have seen with regard to the “revelation of the secret Qom plant” above – and then repeat them ad nausseam so that they come to be taken as the gospel truth – as also seem in the same context – before turning around and accusing Tehran of going back on its word. That would, of course, provide occasion for calling Iran names that are best left out of civilised discourse.

Even as the corporate U.S. media continued to churn out the fabrication about Iran’s agreement to export “most” of its low-enriched uranium, Tehran stuck to its proposition articulated originally by President Ahmadinejad in New York on September 23 to purchase the required uranium for medical use. The Iranian president repeated the same position immediately after the Geneva talks: “Ahmadinejad said Iran’s nuclear

scientists ‘are ready to negotiate with countries willing to sell us enriched uranium.’”<sup>61</sup>

As a matter of fact, CNN’s Elise Labott had noted the early denial of the Western news report by Iran in a write-up on the broadcast channel’s website on October 3: “On Saturday [October 3], headlines from Iran’s *Press TV* quoted the Iranian government: ‘no deal with P5+1 on shipping Iran’s enriched uranium abroad.’”<sup>62</sup> But then, this seasoned reporter, who “has covered four secretaries of state and reported from more than 50 countries,”<sup>63</sup> went on to note how Iran had “cleverly revealed its not-so-secret nuclear facility at Qom to the IAEA hours before Obama was to speak to the G-20 industrialized nations...”<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of such clear rejection of the Western media’s claims of Iran’s agreement to export its uranium for further enrichment, however, there was nothing to stop *The Guardian*, for instance, to report on October 7 that Tehran was now going back on the arrangement. The relevant piece deserves to be reproduced here at some length in view of its audacity in disseminating patronising disinformation:

“The apparent breakthrough in Geneva over the shipping out of most of Iran’s enriched uranium has been called into question. In Geneva, the world seemed to take a step forward on Iran’s uranium. The question now is whether it is about to take one step back or two. Iran’s *Press TV* is quoting Iran’s Supreme National Security Council as saying there was no deal done in Geneva to ship out Iran’s low enriched uranium (LEU) to Russia and France for further enrichment (to 20 per cent purity), processing and eventual return to the Tehran Research Reactor...

“It will also no doubt annoy the Americans and Russians, who thought up the wheeze between themselves ahead of Geneva, as a means of buying more time for diplomacy, and the French who also took part in a side meeting at Geneva on the uranium export deal with the Iranian delegation. The head of that delegation was Saeed Jalili who is also head of the Supreme National Security Council, which is now saying: Deal, what deal? Both the council and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are talking about the ‘purchase’ of 20 per cent enriched uranium. This is what Ahmadinejad had to say on the matter to the semi-official *Fars* news agency (translated by BBC monitoring):

“We announced that we were prepared to hold talks with the experts of other countries in relation to the purchase 20-per cent enriched nuclear fuel for the Tehran reactor. We are ready to hold talks with any country that is interested to provide the fuel. Our suggestion was welcomed and

various countries, individually or in consortiums, offered to do the job.”<sup>65</sup> At the same time, this premier British daily also found courage to take a brush with the truth: “The Iranians informed the IAEA of the existence of the Qom enrichment plant on September 21.”<sup>66</sup>

It is precisely such a mixture of well-calculated half-truths and outright lies that characterizes the corporate Western media’s reporting and commenting on Iran. No amount of jugglery with facts can, however, obfuscate the reality that Iran came out the clear winner in its first round of structured and formal interaction with the United States after three decades of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

### **Tehran’s success**

Unpalatable as that outcome may have been to the West and its corporate media, the same is not lost on them either. That may also, at least in part, explain the chorus of the nonexistent deal on uranium enrichment in order to claim a victory of sorts for the West. Even the CNN report cited above, for instance, had to grudgingly concede that “the real winner” was Iran.<sup>67</sup> David Albright, President of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, agreed:

“These were historic negotiations. I’m happy about that. But in a funny way, I’d say Round 1 went more for [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad than for Obama. Why? Iran got high-profile international talks without much mention of a suspension of its uranium-enrichment programme, and the inspections Iran agreed to for a recently disclosed nuclear site won’t happen right away.”<sup>68</sup>

The inspections did not, indeed, happen right away; nor even within the yet another futile deadline of two weeks set out by President Obama on October 1. Instead, the head of the IAEA travelled to Tehran on October 4 and, after holding meetings there separately with President Ahmadinejad and other Iranian officials, announced that a representative from his Agency would inspect the Qom plant on October 25.<sup>69</sup> “Ahmadinejad was later quoted by the Iranian news agency ISNA as saying that all matters between the Islamic Republic and the IAEA had been ironed out. ‘Because of good cooperation between Iran and the agency, important issues were resolved and today there is no ambiguous issue left between Iran and the Agency,’ the president was quoted as saying.”<sup>70</sup>

### **IAEA: setting the record straight**

An uncontroversial decision taken at Geneva, however, was for another meeting to be held later in the month of October in Vienna for further talks on the question of Iran's requirement of the 20 per cent enriched uranium for medical purposes. While announcing the date of October 19 for the proposed talks at his October 4 press conference, the IAEA Director-General also set the record straight with regard to the issue of Iran's exporting uranium abroad for further enrichment:

"The other issue [apart from the Qom facility], which [the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation] Dr Salehi mentioned, is this project we have been working on for a number of months. Iran has requested cooperation by the Agency in securing fuel for the Tehran research reactor. I have been in consultations with a number of suppliers and I was pleased to see that there is a positive response to the Iranian request. That reactor is working to produce medical isotopes for treatment of cancer patients; it is a humanitarian purpose, and I am very pleased to see a positive response on the part of the number of prospective suppliers."<sup>71</sup>

Clearly, the IAEA chief referred to the Iranian interest in buying 20 per cent enriched uranium and not in exporting its own low-enriched variety. He also divulged that the project had been worked on for a number of months; and it is thus inconceivable that the Western powers would not have been in know of it before President Ahmadinejad's September 23 media interaction in New York. Moreover, a "number of prospective suppliers" had already given their "positive response to the Iranian request." That reported statement by the IAEA Director-General was made on October 4. Why is it that *The Guardian* made such a hue and cry over the Iranian interest in purchasing 20 per cent enriched uranium, implying a going back on its word by Tehran, three days later, on October 7?

The head of the IAEA then went on to refer to his Agency's counter-proposal of uranium's being enriched outside Iran: "To this end, we propose that Iran provides its LEU. It would be enriched; it would be then turned into fuel (fabrication) and then brought back here to Iran for use in the research facilities. We will have a meeting to that end to discuss the technical details and hopefully hammer out an agreement, as early as possible. We will have that meeting in Vienna, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, with the participation of the United States, Russia and France, and of course the Agency will act as a convenor of the meeting."<sup>72</sup>

## Catch-22

There is, however, a catch for the West even in this IAEA proposal. Should an agreement be eventually reached between Iran and any number

of countries to be involved in the further enrichment process, such an arrangement would be in violation of the existing Security Council sanctions on Tehran's export of any nuclear material. "Under U.N. Security Council resolutions, Iran is prohibited from exporting nuclear material, so a new resolution would probably need to be approved for the deal to go through."<sup>73</sup> The irony of the situation is unmistakable. In the face of American keenness to impose what Washington has haughtily been describing as "crippling sanctions" on Iran, the U.S. may end up having to soften some of the restrictions on the country already in place.

More than that, the West has come to be confronted by something of a Catch-22 insofar as Iran's requirement of 20 per cent enriched uranium for its Tehran medical reactor is concerned. The country has amply demonstrated that its need on this count is not only genuine but also humanitarian, a fact conceded by the IAEA Director-General as well, as seen above. It is currently reported to have enough of the substance to run the relevant facility till roughly the end of 2010.<sup>74</sup> But, it cannot wait for the material to run out. So, if additional supplies cannot be arranged from abroad soon enough, Iran would be obliged to start enriching uranium to 20 per cent domestically – a prospect further to haunt the West already perturbed at Tehran's current enrichment of five per cent or even less.

Iran has already indicated such a possibility. Talking to Ali Akbar Dareini of *The Associated Press* in Tehran on October 10, Ali Shirzadian, spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, stated that his country would proceed to enrich its uranium to the higher level of about 20 per cent needed for the Tehran reactor if no deal was reached in talks on Oct. 19 in Vienna. "'The talks will be a test of the sincerity of those countries,' he said. 'Should talks fail or sellers refuse to provide Iran with its required fuel, Iran will enrich uranium to the 20 per cent level needed itself,' he said. Shirzadian said Iran prefers to buy the fuel from the world market, saying that would be cheaper than producing it at home."<sup>75</sup>

### **The way ahead**

Meanwhile, the next deadline of sorts set for Iran by the West, to basically stop its uranium enrichment activity, is the end of the year 2009. In case of non-compliance, the United States, as noted above, has been threatening to get sanctions approved by the Security Council that are tougher than the earlier three rounds and would, in its view, bring Tehran round. The most effective "stick" – to employ the unfortunate analogy employed by the United States in the given context – is perceived by Washington to choke off the supply of petroleum to Iran, along with

sanctioning the international insurance firms involved in these imports by Tehran.

Iran's partial – around 40 per cent – dependence on refined oil as fuel for automobiles has been described as the country's Achilles heel by some Western sources. Although Iran, with an estimated daily export of 2,800,000 barrels of oil in 2007<sup>76</sup>, is the world's third largest supplying country of the energy resource, it is currently obliged to import a good part of its requirement of petroleum due to the lack of enrichment facilities at home.

This particular aspect would require a more thorough probe than that allowed by the present analysis. Nevertheless, it may be noted in brief that such a move is not likely to get the Security Council's approval in view of its strong opposition by Russia and, more so, by China. Secondly, any new sanctions on Iran cannot be expected to prove more successful or effective than has been the fate of the three sets of them imposed on the country over the past few years. Finally, Iran is currently in the process of setting up a major refinery in the south of the country that would, before long, make it self-sufficient for its petroleum needs.

That only leaves out the option of military strikes by either Israel or the United States, or by the two countries in collaboration with each other, on Iran in general and on its nuclear facilities in particular. That, too, is a dimension deserving separate treatment. Nevertheless, such a possibility can reasonably be ruled out for a number of reasons, not least being the fear of retaliation by Iran which clearly is in a position now to hit Israel as also the massive military presence of America in its periphery from Afghanistan down to the Gulf countries and waters. It may also be noted in passing that Iran has repeatedly made it known that it would target Israel as well if it were to come under attack by the United States alone.

All said and done, therefore, there seems to be no reason to believe that the West is in a position to prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear programme that, to date, remains peaceful by all available evidence as also by the IAEA's own conclusive findings. Not only that; Iran also has, over the past seven years since its nuclear programme was made controversial by the United States in particular, succeeded – by virtue mainly of its tenacity and dexterous diplomacy – in shifting the global focus to universal denuclearisation instead. One can hardly take issue with Ehud Barak that the country and its leadership have proved to be much better players in this contest which they have treated like a game of chess at which their expertise is well known.

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