

The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir

Executive Summary

The Book in a Nutshell

Seyed Hossein Mousavian provides a rare window into Tehran's internal deliberations in managing the nuclear crisis that began in 2002 with the revelation of covert nuclear activities in Iran. Mousavian draws on extensive research and intimate knowledge for a better understanding of Iran's nuclear policy. He served as the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's Supreme National Security Council from 1997 to 2005, spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiating team with the EU and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 2003 to 2005, and an adviser to Iran's Supreme National Security Council from 2005 to 2007, before being arrested by the Ahmadinejad government and tried for treason.

The West's current options for dealing with Iran—a preemptive military strike, crippling sanctions, espionage and sabotage, or learning to live with an Iranian bomb—all have serious flaws. Only a comprehensive diplomatic solution can resolve the crisis. To reach an agreement, the United States and Iran need to better understand each other's interests and objectives. This book is an attempt to do precisely that.

Key Themes

The Origin and Development of Iran's Nuclear Program (1956–2001): Iran's nuclear activities far predate the current crisis and even Iran's Islamic Republic. Understanding the history of Iran's atomic program and the role of the West in its founding is important for any analysis of both the political and technical disputes today.

The First Crisis (2002–2003): Initial reports of covert Iranian nuclear activity at the Natanz enrichment facility provoked alarm in the West and a fierce internal debate between conservatives and reformists within Iran over whether to cooperate with the international community.

From Tehran to Paris (2003–2004): Negotiations at Sa'dabad Palace led Iran to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment and provisionally implement the Additional Protocol, prevented the country's nuclear file from being referred to the UN Security Council, and paved the way for cooperation between Tehran and Brussels. IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei's previously undisclosed definition of what would constitute suspension of enrichment created expectations in Tehran that then went unfulfilled, producing lasting confusion and mistrust.

From the Paris Agreement to the 2005 Presidential Election (2004–2005): Talks with Europe collapsed amid the heat of Iran's presidential campaign, as conservatives—led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—attacked moderates for compromising with the West.

The Larijani Period (2005–2006): Ahmadinejad's rise to power dramatically hardened Iran's negotiating position. The new president sharply criticized his predecessor's nuclear concessions, restarted enrichment, and aggressively sought confrontation with the West, as well as with Iranian political leaders and diplomats who favored more forthcoming diplomacy. Ali Larijani, the new national security adviser, turned from the West to the East, hoping that China, Russia, and India would embrace Iran.

To the Security Council (2006): The IAEA dealt a significant blow to Iran by declaring the country in noncompliance with its obligations, prompting the UN Security Council to designate Iran's nuclear program "a threat to international peace and security." Shortly after the Security Council statement, Ahmadinejad wrote a letter to President George W. Bush signaling Iran's readiness for bilateral negotiations and relations with the United States, but Washington missed the signal.

Back to the Security Council and a New Domestic Situation (2006–2007): Continued Iranian intransigence led the UN Security Council to impose further sanctions. Faced with mounting criticism at home, Ahmadinejad began targeting critics of his nuclear policy, including the author.

Iran Alone—The Jalili Period (2007–2008): As the United States began to engage more directly in negotiations, inflammatory rhetoric from Ahmadinejad provoked further UN sanctions and deeper international isolation.

U.S. Engagement (2008–2010): The disputed Iranian presidential election and disclosure of the secret Fordow enrichment facility forced Washington—now backed by a broad international consensus—to heighten pressure on Tehran.

The Crisis Worsens (2010–2012): Multilateral and unilateral sanctions targeting oil exports and the Iranian central bank have severely harmed Iran’s economy and increased Iran’s determination to defy the West and continue its nuclear policy. But Iran still vows not to make nuclear weapons and to want a diplomatic resolution that reaffirms its rights to the nuclear fuel cycle while reassuring the world that Iran will not make nuclear weapons.

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

Negotiate a nuclear package: The P5+1 should assure Iran that it will remove the country’s nuclear dossier from the agendas of the IAEA Board of Governors and the UN Security Council; recognize Iran’s right to nuclear technology, including enrichment; lift international sanctions; and, as required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), cooperate with Iran in the development of peaceful nuclear technology to the same extent as with other non-nuclear-weapon states. In return, Iran should guarantee a permanent ban on the development, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons based on the *fatwa* of Iran’s Supreme Leader and the NPT; establish a consortium with other countries to manage fuel-cycle activities within Iran based on Ahmadinejad’s offer in September 2005; ratify the Additional Protocol; and commit to cooperate with the IAEA on the removal of all remaining questions about its past nuclear activities.

Recognize domestic political realities: Tehran is insistent that it be allowed to develop peaceful nuclear energy, just as Washington is adamant that the Islamic Republic not develop nuclear weapons. Both sides must be realistic, understand the other’s redlines, and seek a comprehensive diplomatic solution that allows both sides to save face.

Negotiate a U.S.-Iran package: There will be no final resolution of Iran’s nuclear program as long as the bilateral relationship between Washington and Tehran continues to be dominated by hostilities, threats, and mutual distrust. In parallel with the nuclear issue, Washington and Tehran should negotiate a bilateral agreement normalizing relations and enhancing cooperation on issues—including pacifying Afghanistan, stopping the drug trade, opposing al-Qaeda, and limiting the role of the Taliban—where the two share common interests.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a visiting research scholar at Princeton University. Previously the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and spokesman for Tehran’s nuclear negotiating team, he was arrested and tried on charges of espionage for his opposition to the nuclear and foreign policy of the Ahmadinejad administration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Additional details are available on the web at: CarnegieEndowment.org/IranianNuclearCrisis. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our government affairs manager, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE:

Founded in 1910, the Carnegie Endowment is a leading, nonpartisan think tank specializing in foreign affairs. It is also the world’s first truly global think tank with operations in Washington, D.C., Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels.