

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION AND REVISITING TURKISH AND U.S. THREAT PERCEPTIONS REGARDING IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Conference Summary

Tehran's nuclear program has been a cause of concern for the international community since at least 2003, after it was revealed that Iran was constructing a number of dual use nuclear facilities critical for the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Despite agreeing that a nuclear-armed Iran would have negative consequences for both Washington and Ankara, many Turkish and American analysts differ in their interpretation of the threat posed by Iran's controversial program. The crux of the disagreement is a difference in opinion over how to best to convince the Iranians to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and abandon its alleged nuclear weapons ambitions. Turkey favors robust diplomacy, believing that diplomatic relations and cooperative engagement will help overcome the decades of suspicion and mistrust that has dominated Iran's engagement with the West. This approach has clashed with the American strategy, which has moved from a policy of engagement towards a sanctions based approach. The difference in strategy is at least partly rooted in differing assessments of Tehran's intentions: many government and non-governmental Turkish analysts do not agree with their American counterparts that Iran's intention is to develop a nuclear weapons capability and believe that the United States is exaggerating the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. What explains the difference in opinion over Iran's nuclear intent? And why have these two long-standing allies clashed over how best to resolve this issue?

To help answer these questions Dr. Şebnem Udum (Hacettepe University) and Assistant Professor Dr. Philipp Bleek (Monterey Institute of International Studies), with the support of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue and Middle East Technical University-Department of International Relations, organized a one-day workshop entitled "Nuclear Proliferation and Revisiting Turkish and U.S. Threat Perceptions Regarding Iran's Nuclear Program". The event brought together approximately 25 experts and researchers engaging on this issue in the Turkish government, embassies, academia and think tanks. Participants discussed the technology of proliferation and power generation, the history of the nonproliferation regime, and U.S. and Turkish policy on Iran's nuclear program. This short report is a summary of the day's discussions and concludes with implications that may help explain the divergence in opinions.

The Science of Proliferation: Dual Use Technology Complicates Debate

In the opening session, Professor Dr. Haluk Utku (Hacettepe University- Institute of Nuclear Sciences) lectured about the technology of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, explaining how a country's enrichment program can be diverted for weapons use. Participants explored the linkage between a civilian enrichment program and a military one, while discussing historical examples of states using civilian programs as a cover for covert military efforts.

The discussion began with an overview of nuclear weapons technology and its relationship with civilian nuclear energy. The conversation quickly turned to Iran's controversial enrichment program, which allows it to overcome the most critical technological challenge to developing nuclear weapons, the acquisition of highly enriched uranium.

Questions centered on the science of nuclear weapons, and whether or not Iran has the infrastructure to develop nuclear weapons. A consensus emerged that Iran has the capability to produce a nuclear weapon should it choose to enrich its stockpiled 20% uranium to 90%, prompting the need for greater international efforts to monitor the Iranian program.

The Politics of Nonproliferation: A Difficult Balancing Act

Dr. Şebnem Udum detailed the evolution of the nonproliferation regime from its inception in the 1960s to its current state in the post 9/11 world. Much of the presentation centered on the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – the centerpiece of the global nonproliferation regime. Since the Treaty's entry into force, external events have challenged global nonproliferation efforts, which has led to the development of new and more stringent instruments to help stem the flow of dual use nuclear technology. At times, these efforts have garnered criticisms from a coalition of skeptical countries, working through both the Non-Aligned Movement and the New Agenda Coalition. These countries argue that the scope of these efforts infringe upon their right to access nuclear technology.

Some argued that the seminal success of the NPT is that it formalized nonproliferation norms. However, others argued that the foundation of the Treaty is being undermined by the nuclear weapons states' slow pace of disarmament and recent efforts to strengthen supply side export control laws. Disagreements over NPT Articles IV (which involves pledges not to constrain civil use of nuclear technology) and VI (which commits the nuclear-armed states to arms control and disarmament) touched off a lively debate about the NPT's perceived inequalities.

Participants agreed that Ankara has grown increasingly sensitive to American-led efforts to limit the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology. With an eye towards its own nascent nuclear program, Ankara is much more hesitant to support calls for Iran to forgo its rights to enrichment. If Turkey were to acquiesce on this issue, it would essentially be endorsing efforts to further curtail the right of all NPT states to access nuclear technology.

Divergent Opinions: Comparing U.S. and Turkish Iran Policies

The centerpiece of the conference touched on the differences in opinion over the threats posed by Iran's nuclear program. Assistant Professor Dr. Philipp Bleek (Monterey Institute of International Studies) and Associate Professor Dr. Mustafa Kibaroglu

(Bilkent University-Department of International Relations) explained in detail the American and Turkish policy on Iran's nuclear program.

Turkey's Middle-Eastern entente has fueled concerns in Washington over Ankara's ideological orientation. There is a consensus in the United States that a nuclear armed Iran would have very negative consequences for American interests in the region. By and large Turkey shares this assessment, agreeing with their American counterparts that a nuclear armed Iran would threaten regional and Turkish security. However, significant differences over Iran's intentions and, relatedly, how to resolve the issue continue to drive a wedge between the two allies.

As part of a broader strategy, the United States has pursued a coercive sanctions-based approach, both to try to induce Iran to engage in serious negotiations and, failing that, to slow down its program. There is a hope that the sanctions will raise the cost of Iran's nuclear program, making its continuation cost prohibitive. At the same time, Washington hopes that the sanctions will buy time for domestic political changes or even contribute to undercutting nuclear proliferation proponents, paving the way for more cooperative Iranian leadership to assume power. Washington has also not taken the use of military force off the table, while at the same time beginning to wrestle with the issue of how to minimize the negative consequences should Iran obtain nuclear weapons despite all these efforts.

Turkish officials argue that sanctions strengthen Iranian hardliners, at the expense of officials more willing to cooperate with the international community. Turkey believes that long term dialogue, and a policy favoring incremental confidence building measures, are the best ways to resolve the current diplomatic impasse. This stance stems in part from Turkey's perception that it bears the brunt of the costs of sanctions, as well as steadfast opposition to military strikes, which officials fear will lead to war and regional instability.

Some participants expressed concerns regarding Turkey's lack of diplomatic urgency, questioning whether Turkey has a policy beyond engagement and negotiations—in other words, while channels of communication are important, it is not clear what substantive issues Ankara wishes to use those channels to negotiate. Others argued that Turkey's close ties with the Tehran make Ankara ideally suited to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. In particular, many agreed that the United States was wrong to quickly discount the Tehran Declaration negotiated by Turkey and Brazil with Iran, arguing that Ankara and Sao Paulo's diplomatic success provided a missed opportunity for more robust engagement.

Many of the Turkish participants argued that this deal was an important confidence-building measure and a necessary first step. Other participants agreed, but worried about its timing and presentation as an alternative for sanctions and the fact that Turkey and Brazil downplayed the agreement's shortcomings.

Conclusion: Implications or the Future

The Iranian issue is likely to continue to play a significant role in Turkish-American relations. The conference generated a number of policy implications for the Turkish-American alliance:

- The Ruling Justice and Development Party appears to have doubled down on its “zero problems” foreign policy after their overwhelming recent electoral win, making it likely that Turkey will continue to engage robustly with Iranian counterparts. Turkish efforts to balance relations with West and East are likely to continue to irritate policymakers in Washington deadset on diplomatically and economically isolating Tehran.
- The Americans have shown little interest in deviating from their sanctions oriented policy, especially after President Obama’s Nawroz message appears to have been rebuffed by the Iranians. The continued push for sanctions will continue to be viewed negatively in Ankara and American unilateral sanctions are not likely to be widely enforced.
- If Turkish policy makers know the Iranians better than the Americans, as they sometimes allege, Turks should be able to help the Americans identify what sort of incentives might induce the Iranians to cooperate.
- Despite their disagreements, Ankara and Washington share a mutual interest in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and should do a better job of engaging each other on this issue.
- The Americans have not done a good job engaging with their Turkish counterparts on this issue and vice versa. Ankara and Washington should find way to engage more productively, perhaps beginning with frank conversations about the assumptions and judgments underpinning both differing assessments of Iranian intent and differing preferred strategies.