



**James Martin Center for
Nonproliferation Studies**
Monterey Institute of International Studies
An Affiliate of Middlebury College

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CNS EXPERTS COMMENT ON IRANIAN URANIUM ENRICHMENT CLAIMS

Monterey, CA; Washington, DC; Cairo, Egypt -- Earlier this week, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told cheering crowds in Tehran that Iran's nuclear technicians had succeeded in producing uranium enriched to 19.9 percent, needed to fuel a research reactor in Tehran.* The reactor, originally supplied by the United States, produces medical isotopes. Nonetheless, the 19.9-percent enriched material, a significant improvement over the 3.5-percent enriched uranium Iran had previously produced, brings Iran closer to the point of being able to manufacture the 80- to 90- percent enriched uranium traditionally used in nuclear weapons. The announcement about the 19.9-percent enriched material surprised observers because it came just days after Ahmadinejad indicated that Iran would accept a Western offer to provide fuel for the Tehran reactor by taking Iran's less enriched material, upgrading it, and fabricating it into fuel rods.

In a series of mandatory resolutions since 2006, the UN Security Council has ordered Iran to cease its uranium enrichment and other sensitive nuclear activities, but Iran has defied these demands. Indeed, just weeks before Ahmadinejad's enrichment breakthrough announcement, he boasted that his country would build ten uranium enrichment plants in coming years.

Although Iran's announced enrichment achievement has yet to be confirmed by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, the country could be an important step closer to attaining its apparent goal of acquiring a nuclear weapon capability.

Experts from the Monterey Institute's James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) who have monitored the Iranian nuclear program offered the following comments on these recent developments, reflecting Arab skepticism about Iran's nuclear claims, dismay at Iran's continued defiance of Security Council demands, and disbelief that Tehran will be able to manufacture fuel for its research reactor.

Reflecting reaction in the Arab World, Ambassador Nabil Fahmy, Chair of the CNS Middle East Nonproliferation Project, and former ambassador of Egypt to the United States, stressed that, "It seems technically questionable that Iran could launch construction of 10 enrichment plants next year, even if it can produce 19.9-percent enriched uranium soon. So one if not both of these statements must be met with skepticism. However, these statements are unquestionably self-defeating and detrimental to Iran if it is looking for diplomatic solutions to its nuclear confrontation with the international community. Therefore, such inflammatory claims should be followed with renewed concern, but not panic, until we verify whether the

* The international definition of uranium that can be theoretically used for nuclear weapons is uranium enriched to 20 percent or more in the isotope U-235. The Iranian fuel would be below this threshold, but its production would reflect Iran's ability to enrich to higher levels.

statements simply reflect misguided diplomacy or whether, in fact, real capabilities lie behind this renewed posturing.”

CNS Senior Research Associate [Dr. Chen Kane](#), a specialist on Mid-East nuclear programs, noted that “President Ahmadinejad’s decision to instruct his scientists to produce 19.9-percent enriched uranium should be understood as a clear indication of Iran’s intentions. There can be little question that this is just a step on the road to higher enrichment levels that will give Iran a virtual nuclear weapon capability and pose a very serious threat in the region and to the international community at large.

“The enrichment announcement directly conflicts with Ahmadinejad’s recently declared willingness to accept the Western fuel deal. Apparently by blowing hot and cold, the Iranians want to lure the West into continuing negotiations, perhaps hoping that new sanctions can be avoided until Gabon replaces France as the President of the Security Council in March.”

CNS Research Scientist [Dr. Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress](#), underscored the difficulty Iran will face in producing fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, stating, “only a handful of countries, including France, the United States, and Argentina, have the facilities in place today to fabricate the fuel rods to the exacting specifications required for the safe and efficient operation of the facility.

“Moreover, if Iran decides to initiate the production of higher enrichment fuel, it will not be without risks. A serious accident occurred in 1999 at a Japanese fuel fabrication facility when technicians trained in fuel fabrication at low enrichments (<5%) executed a procedure to produce higher enrichment fuel (18.8 %). To save time and unaware of the risks that this would entail, the technicians skipped steps that would prevent too much uranium from being introduced into a precipitation tank at one time. As a result, the material in the tank went ‘critical,’ creating a nuclear reaction that sent out a lethal burst of neutrons. In the end two technicians died due to the exposure within one year of the accident, and hundreds of people were evacuated near the plant. This incident is known to be the worst Japanese nuclear accident to date.”

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION CONTACT:

Amb. Nabil Fahmy – nfdpl@usa.net

Dr. Chen Kane – Tel: 202-842-3100 ext. 303 – chen.kane@miis.edu

Dr. Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress – Tel: 831-647-4638 – ferenc.dalnoki@miis.edu

[Leonard S. Spector](#)

Director, CNS Washington, DC Office

Tel: 202-942-3100 ext. 302 – leonard.spector@miis.edu