

Do Iran's nuclear ambitions matter?

Roundtable discussion with: Mr. Patrick Clawson, Deputy Director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Dr. Thanos Dokos, Director of Studies, ELIAMEP and Dr. Michalis Myrianthis, Member of the Board of Directors, Hellenic Petroleum S.A.

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Patrick Clawson argued that Iran rightfully seeks access to modern technology and to a greater role in the broader region. However, given the relative weakness of Iran's neighbours, he questioned whether Iran's nuclear ambitions are justified, or whether they might in fact lead neighbouring countries to expand their own nuclear activity. In this context, he raised the question of whether Turkey might decide to follow suit and the possible consequences for NATO and Greek-Turkish relations of such a development.

Clawson underlined that both capabilities and intentions need to be considered when assessing the situation in Iran. On the matter of whether the US is considering a military intervention against Iran, Clawson responded that future developments would largely depend on Iran's position. In any case, it was noted that the importance of the EU successfully brokering the nuclear deal with Iran is central not only for regional security but also for the EU's global clout.

Turning to the wider region and the core challenges currently faced by Iran's neighbours and in particular by the Gulf countries, four issues were prioritised: 1) energy security, 2) the stabilization of Iraq, 3) Iran's nuclear ambitions, and 4) tensions within domestic politics.

Against this background, Thanos Dokos pointed out that although the Gulf region has traditionally been considered as falling within the US sphere of influence, this has been gradually changing. In effect, the Gulf region is in Europe's immediate neighbourhood and therefore relevant for its wider security environment. It is equally strategically important for the EU's energy supplies. Thus, he argued that we should expect a greater involvement on behalf of the EU in the region.

In effect, the argument from Teheran is that nuclear capability is necessary to face current regional and international threats. The development of such a capacity is a means for Iran to increase its influence in the region and in the broader Islamic world.

Thus, there are currently two options: the diplomatic approach and the option of military action. With regard to the latter, however, this should only be used as a last resort. Regarding non-military means, this includes diplomatic pressure and economic measures (e.g. embargo). The challenge is the extent to which these measures will be successful.

Michalis Mirianthis focused his discussion on the area's oil and gas supplies and their international importance. Energy supply security is affected by: 1) geopolitics, 2) crude oil production capacity, 3) oil refining capacity, 4) stocks, and 5) environmental constraints. Given that Iran ranks second in oil production after Saudi Arabia, the country's importance for Europe is unquestionable. The Gulf States and Iraq are also strategically important, particularly given the growing international energy needs. In effect, the so-called 'hyper-markets' of India, China and Russia are 'thirsty for energy' and one of the core challenges that lies ahead is how to meet these needs.

In light of global interdependencies, concerted action in the Middle East was called for. Finally, it was underlined that the nuclear issue posed by Iran cannot be seen independently from the region's other challenges.