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## Analysis: Will Ashton's time extension allow Iran to build a nuclear weapon?

By BENJAMIN WEINTHAL

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Israeli experts foresee negative outcome of EU foreign policy chief's idea of lengthening 6-month deadline on Iran nuclear talks.

European Union chief diplomat Catherine Ashton on Sunday circulated the [idea of extending the talks](#) to end Iran's military nuclear program beyond the slated [six-month deadline](#).

While saying that everyone is "conscious" of the 180-day time limit, Ashton added: "But everyone will say to you, and rightly so, this is extremely difficult."

The clock on the agreement started on January 20 and runs until July 20.

Israeli political scientists delivered their verdict on Ashton's move to extend: The outcome will be negative and allow Iran to exploit the time frame to build a nuclear weapon.

More than 10 years ago the EU team showed a kind of incurable naïveté during the outset of talks with Iran to stop its development of a nuclear weapons device.

Gerald Steinberg, a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University, told The Jerusalem Post on Tuesday that 10 years ago "[Iranian President Hassan] Rouhani boasted that he was able to manipulate European leadership and continue enrichment."

Rouhani employed a clever, protracted negotiating style to secure more development time for the weaponization of enriched uranium.

There are worrying signs that Ashton and the other world powers have been lulled into a false sense of complacency, harking back to 2003 when Rouhani served as Iran's lead nuclear negotiator.

It is worth recalling that Rouhani's spokesman, during the 2003 talks, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, wrote in his memoir: "Tehran showed that it was possible to exploit the gap between Europe and the United States to achieve Iranian objectives."

The divide-and-conquer bargaining strategy "provided time for Isfahan's uranium conversion project to be finished and commissioned, the number of centrifuges at Natanz increased from 150 to 1,000 and software and hardware for Iran's nuclear infrastructure to be further developed," wrote Mousavian, adding that "the heavy water reactor project in Arak came into operation and was not suspended at all."

Ashton's ostensible indifference toward EU business and government delegations flocking to Iran, since the November 24 interim deal was reached, has raised eyebrows in the United States.

US Sen. Jeanne Shaheen wrote to Ashton in late January: "These delegations to Iran risk undermining the international sanctions regime at precisely the wrong time."

Steinberg termed the proposal of extending talks beyond the July deadline as “counterproductive.”

He said “the question is whether the P5+1 [the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia and China] have redlines” about stopping a nuclear-armed Iran.

“Without a credible threat of punitive sanctions for dragging their [Iranian] feet,” there will be no incentive for Iran to meet the requirements of the P5+1, said Steinberg.

The Joint Plan of Action agreed to by the world powers and Iran in November permits an extension of talks based “upon mutual consent.” A running series of extensions may advance Iran’s nuclear program.

Emmanuel Navon, director of the communications and political science department at the Jerusalem Orthodox College, told the Post the extension is “a bad thing and not surprising that it is coming from Ashton. It is the best deal the Iranians could get, allowing them to reach a nuclear stage to get the bomb.”

He said six months will turn into eight months or 12 months and the Iranians will continue to play for time. Time has always been Iran’s ally. The P5+1 may have failed to learn the lessons from the early rounds of negotiations. Iran’s regime continues to show great skill in the art of procrastination.

Benjamin Weinthal reports on European affairs for The Jerusalem Post and is a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.



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