



Don't Fall for Iran's Empty Nuclear Gesture

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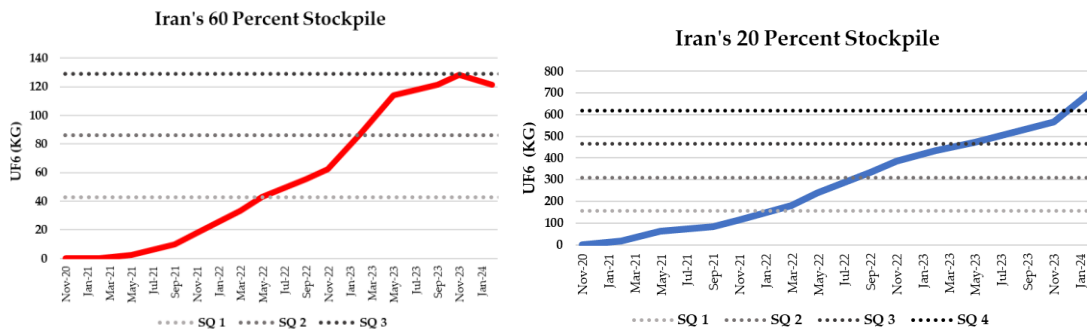
Iran's recent decision to trim its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium does nothing to reduce the much larger dangers posed by its perch on the nuclear weapons threshold. The Biden administration, Congress, and America's allies should see this for what it is: an empty gesture intended merely to forestall serious diplomatic pressure at next week's International Atomic Energy Agency board meeting. This Iranian fig leaf should not induce calm in American and European policymakers, but instead prompt long overdue diplomatic, legislative, and other strategic action to bolster credible deterrence and reimpose stringent international sanctions against Iran's nuclear weapons program.

What Happened?

- On February 26, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [reported](#) that Iran had reduced its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium by 6.8 kilograms (kg) in recent months, after having grown this stockpile continuously since early 2021.

Why Is It Important?

- This slight decrease in Iran's 60 percent stockpile – from 128.3 kg to 121.5 kg, a roughly five percent reduction – does nothing to halt or lessen the growing dangers posed by its assiduously advancing nuclear weapons program.
 - » After cutting this stockpile marginally, Iran still possesses roughly three bombs' worth ("significant quantities," or SQs) of 60 percent enriched uranium – a level that already represents 95 percent of the work needed to achieve weapons-grade fissile material.
 - » During the same period, Iran ramped up production of 20 percent enriched uranium to its highest-ever rate, giving it now more than four SQs of this other stockpile which already represents 90 percent of the work needed to produce weapons-grade fissile material.
 - » Consequently, Iran's capacity to [quickly produce](#) an arsenal's worth of weapons-grade uranium remains fundamentally unchanged by trimming its 60 percent stockpile – to the point where it could still produce perhaps six SQs in the first month after any decision to "break out" toward the bomb, and an additional four SQs over the following two months.



- Equally concerning, Iran continues its years-long [violations](#) of its IAEA safeguards obligations, both by restricting inspectors’ access to its declared nuclear facilities and by stonewalling their inquiries into Tehran’s work on building a nuclear weapon.
 - » Over the last two-plus years, Iran’s obfuscations have enabled it to conduct a “mass of activity about which we [don’t know anything](#),” according to IAEA Director General Grossi.
- In this larger context, the minor reduction in Iran’s 60 percent stockpile risks inducing false senses of calm or accomplishment in American and allied policymakers, in turn further encouraging them to remain on autopilot and avoid addressing Tehran’s nuclear progress.
 - » The Biden administration could be tempted to treat Iran’s superficial slowdown as confirming the wisdom of its own [non-policy](#) that avoids direct pressure on Tehran, in the hopes of simply avoiding any showdown over the matter amid competing crises on the ground in the Middle East, Ukraine, and potentially the Indo-Pacific.
 - However, since the administration adopted this non-policy in late 2022 after unofficially [admitting](#) that Tehran’s intransigence killed the JCPOA nuclear deal, Iran’s nuclear program has expanded precipitously – including doubling its 60 percent stockpile.
 - » The minimal cut to its 60 percent stockpile is also just the latest instance of Tehran offering diplomatic [fig leaves](#) to the United States and its European partners prior to the IAEA’s quarterly board meetings, in order to forestall censure resolutions that could ultimately lead to the reimposition of UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on Iran’s nuclear program.
 - Unfortunately, Iran’s has good reason to believe that such empty gestures can stave off censure and sanctions, given repeated [unfulfilled](#) U.S. and European threats to punish Iran’s violations at more than a dozen previous IAEA board meetings, dating back at least to 2020.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Because Iran’s latest moves do nothing to resolve its longstanding and systematic violations of safeguards that become ever more important the closer it gets to the nuclear weapons threshold, the United States and its European partners should finally fulfill their long-running pledges to censure Iran at the upcoming IAEA board meeting and initiate [the process](#) to “snap back” stringent UNSC sanctions on Iran’s enrichment and other nuclear-related [activities](#).
- In tandem, the Biden administration must articulate a clear and coherent strategy that builds and enforces credible threats against Tehran’s nuclear aggression and other malign behaviors.
 - » Since deterrence is fungible, more robust and credible threats against Iran-backed regional aggression can help convince Tehran to rein its nuclear advances, and vice-versa.

- » This approach should leverage the administration's recent stronger military responses to Iran-backed attacks on its forces and partners in the Middle East, making explicitly clear that the United States is ready and willing to go further as needed to target Iranian assets directly – including those related to its nuclear weapons program.
- » It also entails ending the administration's [unprompted](#) avowals of its own self-deterrence and overarching desire to avoid risks of escalation, as evidenced by how it telegraphed certain preparations for recent strikes, in order to give Iran ample warning and time to pull out its high-value personnel and materiel in advance.
- Congress needs to backstop the administration by getting its act together and passing vital measures to support key nonproliferation efforts and America's ally Israel against Iran.
 - » Congress should initiate the "legislative snapback" process to block U.S. sanctions relief for Iran and signal bipartisan congressional support for enhanced pressure on Tehran in response to the latter's egregious and serial violations of nonproliferation obligations.
 - » It also should finally pass a significant aid package for Israel, in order to strengthen shared bilateral efforts to push back and impose serious costs on Iranian aggression.