

Interview:

Mohamed ElBaradei

By Charley J. Levine

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Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), is charged with monitoring the development of nuclear capability in nonnuclear weapon nations. For his efforts, the Egyptian-born diplomat and the IAEA were awarded the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. The interview below is edited from three sources at the International Conference to Prevent Nuclear Catastrophe, organized by the European Jewish Fund and held in Luxembourg last June: direct questions from our correspondent, a press briefing and remarks from ElBaradei's formal address. A sidebar adds more recent developments.

Q. What can and should the international community do when a nation such as Iran has nuclear ambitions?

A. It is very difficult to say how close countries are to this status because so many factors are involved. There is a weaponization process that is required even once a country has the actual atomic capability. For example, the ability to convert the potential into a weapon by developing a missile or other delivery system. The IAEA doesn't look into missiles, focusing rather on the production of nuclear materials, nuclear enrichment and so on. We need [Iran] to listen to the international community...to suspend their enrichment activities. But the international community should also do its utmost to engage Iran in comprehensive dialogue because [the threat] will not be resolved except in this way. Iran's security, economic and technology concerns must be addressed.

Q. So how close is Iran to nuclear capability?

A. I tend to accept the analysis of the director of the C.I.A. who is saying that even if nuclear weapons are Iran's goal, this will not come until the end of this decade or sometime in the middle of the next one; in other words, three to eight years from now.

Q. What are some of the ideas now under consideration to stop the process?

A. One idea floated a brief time ago could be a mutual time-out. The U.N. Security Council would suspend its sanctions, and Iran would suspend its enrichment-related activities. Something like this is, in fact, imbedded in the Security Council resolutions to encourage negotiations. My own priorities...are to gain the ability to do comprehensive, robust verification. We want to make sure that Iran would be part of the international nuclear regime [of agreements].

Q. Can you give an example where full-pressure verification and transparency has worked?

A. Perhaps we can draw a measure of inspiration from Korean developments. After that situation moved in the wrong direction for years, North Korea did, in fact, develop nuclear weapons. Finally, when the parties sat together, they were able to at least start a containment process.

Q. Pakistan has nuclear weapons, and some experts are alarmed at this, since Pakistan is a volatile country. What if its present, Western-friendly regime is one day replaced by a different set of rulers?

A. My answer must be general because it is not limited to [Pakistan]. There is...always a risk with every country that has such weapons. Nuclear weapons can be stolen....

Q. Why is nonproliferation so complicated a challenge?

A. In countries that cooperate with international inspection, such as Japan and Brazil, there are checks that stop a country [with atomic capability] from moving...to weapons-level enrichment. One requires a certain number of centrifuges to develop a nuclear weapon.

Q. What was your main message to this international conference on preventing nuclear catastrophe?

A. The nuclear threat today is becoming more dangerous and complex. It ranges from nuclear terrorism to [the need for] protection and security of nuclear materials to the risks of new countries dangerously close to acquiring such weapons. More and more countries feel insecure.... The more countries that have these weapons, the higher the odds that nuclear weapons will be used, either accidentally or intentionally. We see a banalization of the subject in which people talk casually about it, not understanding that such weapons can lead to the destruction of civilization as we know it. We need a drastic change in our collective security system. We must address the nuclear terrorist threat and the whole process of states emerging into nuclear-weapons capabilities. We must advance nuclear disarmament, even to the point of treating nuclear weaponry like genocide.

Q. The IAEA is a watchdog. How do you remain a dog that can bite, not just bark?

A. Effective verification has four elements: adequate legal authority; state-of-the-art technology; access to all relevant information; and sufficient human and financial resources. In 2004, a U.N. high-level panel singled out the IAEA's work as an extraordinary bargain: [With an annual budget of] \$130 million, we verify the nuclear programs of all nonnuclear weapon states—more than 900 declared nuclear facilities in 70 countries. None of this even takes into account the 27,000 nuclear warheads that today remain in the arsenals of nine nations.

We are the eyes and ears of the international community. Yet, we are forced to make do on a shoestring budget. Even now with every other world leader highlighting nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism as the number one global security threat, we continue to

struggle to achieve a modest budget supplement of \$15 million to \$20 million.

Q. How can you monitor what nations wish to hide?

A. Every country in the world can use the same logic to justify developing its own nuclear deterrent. Why should some nuclear-weapons states be trusted, but not others? And who is qualified to make that judgment? Why is it O.K. for some to live under a nuclear threat, but not others, who continue to be protected by a nuclear umbrella? It is clear that a security strategy rooted in “us versus them” is no longer sustainable. Every country, irrespective of its ideology or orientation, will do what it takes to feel secure, including seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. What makes this more dangerous is that, in an era of globalization and interdependence, the insecurity of some will inevitably lead to the insecurity of all. In my view, the solution lies in creating an environment in which nuclear weapons are universally banned, morally abhorred and their futility unmasked.

Iran: Open for Inspection?

It is too soon to know whether an agreement made in July between United Nations nuclear inspectors and Iran will hold, though Iran has agreed to permit the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect its heavy-water reactor before the end of July. If Iran cooperates with the IAEA, then the agency may be able to ascertain whether Iran’s claim that it has no plans to build nuclear weapons is true. Iran has said that its atomic activities are meant solely to generate energy, but global experts are near-unanimous in expressing urgent concern that Iran is working hard to develop nuclear weapons quickly. The United Nations Security Council has already passed two sets of sanctions against Iran for banning inspection, and the United States and its Western allies were pushing for further sanctions.

The Security Council is also seeking full access to the work at Arak, demanding never-before-granted transparency. For two decades, nuclear activities at Arak were hidden, until they were disclosed four years ago by a group of Iranian dissidents. Also at issue are Iran’s past plutonium experiments. Arak’s nuclear activities could produce plutonium; plutonium and enriched uranium can be used in warheads.