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Is Iran unlocking the gates to Armageddon?

BY MARK TOTH, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 05/25/23 7:30 AM ET

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Nearly a year ago, I warned in these pages that Israel and Iran were rapidly reaching an inflection point over Tehran's intent to weaponize its nuclear program. In June 2022, Iran was reported to already have amassed 95 pounds of highly enriched uranium to a 60 percent level — well beyond the amount of mass needed for an atomic weapon, yet still short of the 90 percent enrichment required for an Armageddon-like detonation.

Now, according to a February 2023 official International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report to the United Nations Security Council, Iran has portentously amassed a stockpile of 193 pounds of U-235 enriched to 60 percent, or enough mass to produce three full-scale atomic weapons. It has also, alarmingly, demonstrated a menacing capacity to enrich U-235 particles to 83.7 percent. Equally disconcerting was "two cascades of IR-6 centrifuges at Iran's Fordo facility" were "configured" to facilitate reaching a weaponized grade of 90 percent.

Iran clearly knows now how to unlock the doors to a nuclear Armageddon. There is a growing sense in Israel that Jerusalem is quickly running out of time to prevent Iran from becoming a regional nuclear power. Moreover, it is highly likely that, as part of Tehran's partnership to supply Russian President Vladimir Putin with drones for use in Ukraine, Moscow is helping Iran overcome the last of several remaining technical obstacles to producing, weaponizing, delivering and detonating a nuclear bomb.

"Particles" are not the same as highly enriched uranium. However, like a dying canary in a coal mine, their enrichment is an unmistakable signal to the Israeli Defense Force that the

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Iran's nuclear sites are as far as 1,000 times east of Tel Aviv, including Iran's purported [atomic test site](#) in the Lutz Desert.

In 1981, Israel launched [Operation Babylon](#), which successfully destroyed Saddam Hussein's Osirak nuclear facility then under construction. That required a single 2,000-mile aerial trip. Now, in direct contrast, there are at least seven major known [Iranian nuclear](#) sites spanning the country, including Bushehr, which is being built in partnership with Russia, the Natanz Enrichment Plant, and the Isfahan Nuclear Fuel Research and Production Center. Beyond doubt, there are other critical facilities that would have to be struck by the Israeli Air Force to sufficiently degrade Iran's capacity to build and launch nuclear weapons.

Jerusalem, since early 2021, has increasingly publicly signaled to Tehran a willingness and readiness to do just that. Then-Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi, the Israeli Defense Force's Army Chief of Staff, [openly declared](#) that Israel had "dramatically accelerated" funding and plans for an attack on Iran's nuclear installations, enrichment sites and research centers. Subsequently, in a highly unusual move for the normally secretive Israeli government when it comes to the nation's military capabilities, [Jerusalem leaked](#) in August 2022 that its [stealth F-35 fighter bombers](#) had "repeatedly" and successfully "penetrated Iranian airspace."

Washington, hesitatingly, is trying to help Jerusalem ratchet up the [pressure on Tehran](#), agreeing to the "massive joint military exercise in Israel" earlier in January codenamed [Juniper Oak 23.2](#). More than 6,000 U.S. soldiers joined 1,100 IDF forces in maneuvers involving 142 coalition aircraft. However, despite the overt threats to U.S. national security interests in the Middle East and elsewhere a nuclear armed Iran would pose, the Biden administration is seemingly still mired in the false promise of continued diplomacy with Iran.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's has repeatedly tried to revive the Obama administration's [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) of October 2015, which President Donald Trump [terminated](#) three years later in May 2018. But in spite of Sullivan's efforts, Iran has only obfuscated and used the intervening time lost to negotiations to continue its nuclear program unabated. Sullivan has rather naively viewed diplomacy as an end to a means, but Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei sees it as a means to ending Israel's window of opportunity to stop Tehran from going nuclear.

Despite the February IAEA reports of Iran enriching U-235 particles to 83.7 percent — just a hop, skip and a jump from a weapons grade of 90 percent — Sullivan was still preaching [deterrence and diplomacy](#) earlier this month, during a less-than-inspiring address to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Yes, Sullivan said all the right things, including that "Iran can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon." But the net effect now is that Washington is like a dog chasing its own tail when it comes to stopping Iran's accelerating nuclear ambitions.

also in that the Biden administration has been repeatedly outfoxed by Chinese President Xi Jinping when it comes to Iran. This is nowhere more evident than in Xi's success in peeling off Saudi Arabia and facilitating Riyadh's renewed [diplomatic ties](#) with Tehran. In his speech, Sullivan unconvincingly tried to spin that setback as a positive, claiming the Biden administration "stayed in close touch with the Saudis" until the "deal [was] reached."

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If Iran has unlocked the gates to Armageddon, then diplomacy, no matter how hard Sullivan may push for it, is rapidly running out of time, if not on empty. Stronger, decisive military measures are increasingly becoming the only viable option. Already, Israel appears to be in the beginning stages of prepping for an attack on Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet has launched a series of air strikes on Iranian backed militia and forces, including [Islamic Jihad](#) in Gaza, a [Hamas faction](#) in Lebanon, and [Iranian military advisors](#) in Syria.

Is this a prelude to something? Quite possibly. If and when Jerusalem acts militarily against Tehran to stop its nuclear ambitions, it will likely involve four different fronts, as Iranian-backed groups in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza would immediately launch reprisal missile and rocket attacks on Israel. For now, however, only one thing is certain. Tehran has inserted the nuclear key into the gate lock of Armageddon and is beginning to twist it open.

Mark Toth writes on national security and foreign policy and previously was an economist, entrepreneur, and former board member of the World Trade Center, St. Louis. Follow him on Twitter: [@MCTothSTL](#)

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BY JONATHAN SWEET, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR
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