

U.S.-UAE nuclear deal to test Obama

By Eli Lake

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A nuclear cooperation agreement signed by the United States and the United Arab Emirates on Thursday could pose an early test of the incoming administration's policies on nonproliferation and Iran.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah Bin Zayid Al Nahyan signed a "123" agreement, named for a section of the Atomic Energy Act. It promises U.S. cooperation on civil nuclear power in return for safeguards against sensitive technology being diverted to a weapons program or another country.

Given the calendar, Barack Obama, who takes the presidential oath of office Tuesday, almost certainly will be the one to decide whether to send the agreement to Congress for approval. Some legislators and proliferation specialists say they would want the United States to use the agreement to leverage more cooperation from the small Gulf nation in pressuring Iran to halt its nuclear program.

The UAE is a major trading partner of Iran and has been criticized for failing to implement stringent controls on certain financial transactions and the export of materials with dual civilian and military uses to Tehran. There also are concerns about other nations in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, seeking nuclear power.

"I and many other members of Congress place a very high priority on the international effort to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability and will be analyzing this and any other nuclear cooperation agreement in the context of how it implicates the attainment of that goal," said Rep. Howard L. Berman, a California Democrat who heads the House Foreign Affairs Committee. At the same time, he praised the agreement as a model for future atomic energy accords.

The ranking Republican on the committee, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, on Wednesday introduced legislation that would condition the U.S. implementation of the agreement on the UAE making more progress against nuclear smuggling.

The emirate of Dubai hosts several Iranian banks that the Treasury Department and CIA have accused of laundering money for Iran's nuclear program. A recent report from the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), a Washington think tank, singles out the UAE and Malaysia for lax export control laws and charges that vendors in Dubai have transshipped sensitive military-grade electronics to Iran.

ISIS President David Albright told The Washington Times that on the issue of nuclear smuggling, the emirates "have improved. I don't want to beat them up." He said that the federal government of the UAE in Abu Dhabi has implemented new export controls in the past year.

But "they have a long way to go," he added. "Dubai should not be allowing companies that are blacklisted to do business, especially those companies doing business with Iran's centrifuge program."

Companies based in Dubai have been discovered trying to procure dual-use technology and then selling it to Iran, Pakistan and other proliferators. Mr. Albright said that his institute last month discovered one such company that had sent out a tender for sensitive nuclear equipment. He declined to identify the company or the equipment, citing legal constraints.

A fact sheet produced by the UAE Embassy, made available to reporters Wednesday, said the country's coast guard has interdicted "scores of ships suspected of carrying illicit cargo" and that the government has shut down a number of companies involved in money laundering and nuclear proliferation.

Hamad al-Kaabi, the UAE ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, told reporters Wednesday that the "123" agreement showed potential proliferators the benefits of cooperating with the international community.

"The whole model is really a counter to what Iran is doing in terms of transparency and in terms of high standards and safety," he said.

Senior U.S. officials have praised the UAE's counterproliferation efforts. In his nomination hearing in July, the U.S. ambassador to the country, Richard Olson, said, "The UAE is committed to preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."

He noted that the country's endorsement of a U.S. program to intercept shipments of dangerous materials to rogue states - the so-called Proliferation Security Initiative - in 2006 and the passage in 2007 of what he called a "comprehensive export control law empowering the federal authorities to take action against companies or shipments threatening UAE national security."

Frederick Jones, a spokesman for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the committee would study the agreement carefully.

"Ending the proliferation of nuclear weapons is one of the most pressing issues of our time," he said. "In the wrong hands, peaceful nuclear fuel cycle technology can be converted for military use. This agreement will be scrutinized to assure that proper safeguards are in place to prevent nuclear proliferation."