# IAEA Reports Renew Questions About Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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Brief Analysis

## U.S. officials have ample grounds to reinvigorate diplomatic pressure after the world's nuclear watchdog accused Iran of being uncooperative, but they need to focus on the right questions.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's latest quarterly report on Iran, revealed March 3, was accompanied by another IAEA report criticizing the regime for being unhelpful and blocking inspectors from doing their jobs. Perusing its contents, one cannot help but hear the sound of a polite fiction—that Tehran's nuclear ambitions and activities have been clipped by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—being blown asunder. The accompanying report's underlying message is that the skepticism of Iranian motives and actions expressed by the Trump administration and others has been well deserved.

The main quarterly report shows that Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium has nearly tripled since the previous report in November. In theory, this means that further enrichment could enable it to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for an unsophisticated bomb in little more than six months, depending on the **number of centrifuges used and their efficiency (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-the-goal-posts-irans-uranium-enrichment-program)** .

Meanwhile, the accompanying report describes how Iran has denied access to locations that may have been used for nuclear work in the early 2000s, and where activities "consistent with efforts to sanitize part of the location" have been detected since last July. According to U.S. intelligence, Iran halted at least part of its military nuclear work in 2003, yet continued trying to enrich uranium to a level at which it can be used as nuclear explosive material. Whether the partial halt was ordered because weapons design work had been completed successfully or not is a

hotly debated subject. A less plausible explanation is that Iran simply gave up plans to develop nuclear weapons.

The timing of the reports (the first prepared under new IAEA director-general Rafael Grossi of Argentina) could be politically fortuitous for those countries eager to maintain pressure on Tehran. The low turnout in Iran's parliamentary election last month suggests waning enthusiasm for the policy mindset of the hardline candidates who dominated the lists. Other recent stumbles—from trying to deny the shootdown of an airliner in January to hosting the region's largest outbreak of coronavirus—have only added to public perceptions of regime incompetence and deceit, while sanctions and persistently low oil prices are upping the pressure by reducing the government's meager export revenues.

Under these circumstances, what response can the international community expect from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the senior echelons of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who heavily influence nuclear policy? If one subscribes to the official Iranian view as stated in the nuclear agreement—that "under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop, or acquire any nuclear weapons"—then there is little to worry about. But the concern has always been that this principle is a complete fiction, even when Tehran was still complying with many of the agreement's temporary technical limitations. Accordingly, it is high time to reconsider the fundamental questions that policymakers should be asking about Tehran's nuclear ambitions, both among themselves and when engaging their Iranian counterparts.

**Why would Iran want to develop nuclear weapons?**

Regimes like Iran's tend to view an arsenal of atomic bombs as both a status symbol and a deterrent against external military attack. Even the late shah of Iran was thought to have considered a nuclear option before the Islamic Revolution ousted him. Despite denying such ambitions in public, Supreme Leader Khamenei may believe that nuclear weapons would confirm the ultimate success and permanence of his theocracy. Iranian views are surely informed by nuclear outcomes in other countries—in North Korea, for example, Kim Jong-un's regime seems firmly entrenched after six nuclear tests, while in Libya, Muammar Qadhafi was overthrown after he gave up his nuclear program.

**How would a successful nuclear weapons program be defined?**

There are various definitions, ranging from the ability to make one test device to a fully operational deterrent strike force. The IAEA thinks in terms of a "significant quantity" of nuclear explosive material—either high-enriched uranium (HEU) or plutonium. For HEU, which Iran is believed to want to produce, the agency defines this amount as 25 kilograms, though expert bomb designers may need much less.

The ability to make a working bomb can only be proven definitively by detonating it in an underground tunnel or remote place. Even then, making the initial device deliverable by aircraft or missile usually takes much longer. Of course, a device could still be deemed usable even without such proof, as the United States showed in 1945 when an untested design was used to destroy Hiroshima. Moreover, when India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in 1998, Western officials judged that they would need to conduct more tests before having credible nuclear strike forces—neither country did so, yet no one doubts their nuclear weapon status today.

Observers speculate that Iran would be satisfied with the ambiguity of the world believing it may have a bomb, imitating the policy that Israel has followed for decades. But the evidence suggests the contrary—according to documents discovered by Israel, Iran prepared several test sites in desert areas around twenty years ago and had plans to make five bombs.

**How complete is foreign knowledge of Iran's nuclear program?**

IAEA inspectors can monitor equipment, analyze samples, and ask questions, but they are not spies, as Iran

sometimes likes to depict them. Their ability to function has to be agreed with the host nation. Various foreign intelligence agencies have monitored the country's nuclear activities for years, but this surveillance has had blind spots in the past and probably still does today. When Israeli agents broke into Iran's nuclear archive in 2018, they only had time to seize about 20 percent of the material in the building. And when China gave Pakistan a weapon design and enough HEU for two bombs in 1981, Western governments did not discover the transfer for many months. Beijing is unlikely to give such nuclear gifts to Iran, but can the same be said for North Korea?

**Can Iran's apparent nuclear ambitions be stopped?**

Short of regime overthrow or a devastating war, probably not. By the late 1980s, the United States had given up trying to stop Pakistan's nuclear program, which was comparable to Iran's today in terms of infrastructure. Diplomacy was only successful in the sense that Pakistan delayed testing until 1998, when an Indian test prompted Islamabad to follow suit, setting off their development of rival strike forces. The current discussion about curbing Iran's program shares similarities with that period.

**What are the regional consequences of Iran's nuclear program?**

In recent years, Tehran's nuclear activities and destabilizing regional behavior have spurred Israel and the Gulf states to expand their security ties. But these nascent or previously clandestine relations are far from a full-fledged alliance capable of stopping Iran. Even Israel's own assumed nuclear weapons capability does not seem to be deterring Tehran—in fact, it may be inspiring the regime's activities.

In the meantime, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have established their own civil nuclear programs. The UAE has accepted tight limitations, but Saudi Arabia announced last month that it will explore for uranium ore on its territory—a move that is unnecessary for nuclear power generation given the well-supplied global market of enriched uranium fuel. Saudi energy minister Abdulaziz bin Salman has stated that the kingdom wants to "control the full cycle," which is code for enriching uranium, a process that can produce either low-enriched fuel or, with tweaks, HEU suitable for bombs.

More ominously, Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman visited Pakistan on March 2 for talks with military chief Qamar Javed Bajwa and Prime Minister Imran Khan. The Saudis have close historical links to Pakistan's nuclear program and may have bought a factory **to manufacture nuclear-capable missiles (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/money-for-missiles-reassessing-the-saudi-visit-to-pakistan)** from Islamabad a few years ago. The Pakistani media reported the latest meetings in terms of the perceived Indian threat, but the Saudi minister tweeted simply that he had delivered a message from the leadership in Riyadh.

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which has attempted with some success to limit the world's military nuclear powers to Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States. The only other countries with nuclear weapons are NPT non-signatories India, Israel, and Pakistan, as well as North Korea, which withdrew from the treaty three years before testing its first bomb (the withdrawal option also exists for Iran). But the number could have been much higher, and may yet rise if certain states feel sufficiently threatened by hostile nuclear powers in their neighborhood. For example, Japan and South Korea might decide that they need nuclear weapons to deter North Korea if they judge U.S. deterrent power inadequate.

U.S. diplomacy is therefore central to blocking or delaying further proliferation—though even that may not be enough. The latest IAEA reports should serve as a reason to boost the effort, particularly in regard to Iran.

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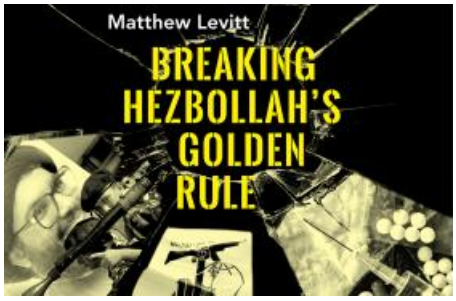


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