Iran's Nuclear Program: "Credible" Evidence of "Continuing" Work on a Bomb

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Brief Analysis

The latest IAEA report should serve to shift the public debate from whether Iran is developing a nuclear weapon to how to stop it.

The much-anticipated International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran has been released with a damning indictment: "The Agency has serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme" and that credible information "indicates that Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device...and that some activities may still be continuing" (**read a PDF of the report (http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/2011/IAEA-Nov-2011-Report-Iran.pdf)**).

Of equal concern is the IAEA's judgment that Iran's work on its Shahab-3 missile "concluded that any payload option other than nuclear...could be ruled out." The report notes that when Iran was challenged on this, it dismissed the evidence as being "an animation game." Tehran has consistently denied that its nuclear program is intended for military purposes. The report should help Washington, using diplomatic and economic sanctions, to force Iran to fully explain its nuclear program and to curtail its military dimensions.

In the past, IAEA reports on Iran have tackled concerns about possible Iranian weapon developments in the course of a few sentences. This time, the chronological and organizational history of Iran's nuclear weapons program is laid out in a fourteen-page annex to the regular update on Iran's supposedly civil nuclear activities. The report notes that it received information about Iran's suspected activities from ten countries.

The annex dates Iran's undeclared nuclear work with possible military dimensions to the late 1970s and early 1980s. (The Islamic revolution, which overthrew the Shah of Iran, took place in February 1979.) It doesn't name other countries that may have helped Iran but does refer to "a clandestine nuclear supply network" that is assumed to be the group of foreign businessmen who helped supply the Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan. A member of this network admitted to the IAEA that Iran had been provided with design information for nuclear explosives.

Khan built Pakistan's uranium enrichment facilities, designed its first atomic bomb from plans supplied by China, and designed its 700-mile-range Ghauri missile, like Iran's Shahab a version of the North Korean Nodong missile. In correspondence with this writer, Khan has explained how nuclear ties began between the two countries after then president Ali Khamenei visited Pakistan in 1986 and that Khan personally delivered centrifuge plans and parts to an intermediary who handed them over to the Iranian embassy in Islamabad.

The Pakistani contribution to Iran's nuclear project has long been evident. Initially, Tehran referred to its centrifuge types as the P1 and P2 models, the same designation as Pakistan's centrifuges, but claiming that the "P" stood for "Persian" rather "Pakistan." (It now calls them IR-1 and IR-2.) Like Pakistan, Iran is thought to be working on an implosion-type device, using highly enriched uranium as an explosive. The IAEA annex notes, without comment, that Iran's initial work came under a body entitled the Education Research Institute (ERI). Khan's organization in Islamabad was founded as the Engineering Research Laboratories (ERL).

More help for Iran came from other countries, according to the IAEA. A "foreign expert" identified in the media as Russian, who "worked for much of his career...in the nuclear weapons program of the country of his origin" was in Iran from 1996 to 2002, ostensibly to lecture on how the same explosive techniques used to set off implosion-type atomic bombs could be used in the diamond industry.

Despite its scientific language, the IAEA report should serve to shift the public debate from whether Iran is developing a nuclear weapon, to how to stop it. This will require diplomatic leadership to ensure a strong statement at the next IAEA board meeting in Vienna on November 17. Washington should build a consensus with the ten countries that contributed to the report and seek to add more. But the report also shows how close Iran has come to developing deliverable nuclear weapons, including installing centrifuges in a facility hidden inside a mountain. This is a disappointing commentary on the success of action so far.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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