

Iran's Military Sites Continue to Haunt the Nuclear Accord

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October 12, 2017

Given the IAEA's legal uncertainty about Parchin and the Security Council's discord about further inspections, the Trump administration needs to decide how hard to press for more answers on weaponization issues.

The legacy of Iran's suspected nuclear weapons work has emerged as a central issue for President Trump as he seeks to chart a new policy toward Tehran this month. Senior administration officials are indicating they want to reopen the question; in August, U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley specifically demanded that international inspectors be granted vastly expanded powers to enter Iran's military sites as a means of guarding against any covert atomic bomb development. If the administration plans to follow up on that demand, it will need to answer important questions about the timing, scope, and potential consequences of increased U.S. pressure.

THE DOMESTIC DEBATE

Some current and former U.S. officials warn that taking an aggressive approach on weaponization issues could spark a new standoff with Iran in the coming months, potentially unraveling the 2015 agreement that rolled back much of its nuclear capacity. Iranian officials have already said they will not allow the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to reenter suspect military sites.

Still, many of these same U.S. officials admit that a confrontation over access to such sites will likely happen down the road anyway. Under the nuclear deal, the IAEA is required to reach a "broader conclusion" on whether Tehran's nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes. International sanctions are to be permanently lifted then, or after Tehran complies with the agreement for eight straight years (2023 if current circumstances hold). Access to military sites, particularly the vast Parchin base south of Tehran, would almost certainly be required for the agency to complete its work and reach that conclusion.

Former members of the Obama administration's negotiating team argue that the nuclear agreement will foster greater cooperation with Iran, which in turn will allow the international community to settle any weaponization issues more easily in the coming years. They do not see the need for President Trump to precipitate a crisis now when the IAEA has concluded that Iran is abiding by the deal's requirements.

Yet senior Trump administration officials counter that failing to confront Iran now could allow it to secretly make advances on weaponization in order to quickly produce a bomb once the deal's constraints are lifted. Accordingly, Ambassador Haley has called for international consensus on how suspected weaponization work should be handled, telling the UN in September, "If the Iran nuclear deal is to have any meaning, the parties must have a common understanding of its terms...Iranian officials have already said they will refuse to allow inspections at military sites, even though the IAEA says there must be no distinction between military and non-military sites."

UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS ABOUT PARCHIN

For more than a decade, Western governments and the IAEA have attempted to assess how close Iran was to developing a nuclear weapon prior to the 2015 deal. U.S. intelligence agencies concluded in 2007 that Tehran had given up a highly centralized weapons program akin to the Manhattan Project four years earlier, though they said some weapons-related activities likely continued. The IAEA offered a similar assessment but said more formal work might have continued until 2009. Iran denies ever attempting to develop a bomb.

Tehran was supposed to address the international community's concerns about weaponization concerns as part of the nuclear agreement but came up short. Among other things, it refused to give the IAEA access to the top nuclear scientists believed to be involved in weapons tests in the early 2000s, according to agency staff. Tehran also claimed that documents the IAEA had amassed on weaponization were fabricated. In the end, the agency was permitted just one visit to a single military site, the Parchin base.

Parchin is one of the facilities the Trump administration remains fixated on today, according to senior U.S. officials. The IAEA found traces of manmade uranium at the base during its 2015 inspection, and U.S. authorities concluded that these discoveries were likely tied to weapons work conducted there more than a decade earlier. Iran told the agency that the traces were linked to its conventional weapons stockpile, but IAEA director-general Yukiya Amano disagreed. "The samples did not support [the] Iranian story," he said in a 2016 interview; "The Iranians weren't telling us everything in this regard."

Even so, neither the Obama administration nor the IAEA pressed Iran on the discovery, instead allowing the nuclear deal to go into force in January 2016. Senior U.S. officials have indicated that American intelligence agencies already knew what type of weapons tests had been conducted at Parchin, and they concluded that it did not make sense to blow up the agreement over the discovery. As one official noted in 2016, revisiting the base was unlikely to reveal much in the way of new information -- "What's important now is that they don't do it again."

Given these past sensitivities, the Trump administration needs to decide how hard to press for more answers on Parchin and other weapons-related issues. Ambassador Haley has already argued with Russian diplomats at the UN over access to Iranian military sites. Moscow contends that the IAEA has no mandate under the nuclear deal to inspect these facilities, prompting a rebuttal from Haley on September 28: "Now it appears that some countries are attempting to shield Iran from even more inspections. Without inspections, the Iran deal is an empty promise."

For his part, Amano stated last month that he is unsure about the full extent of the IAEA's powers under the nuclear deal. Section T of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action bars Iran from developing technologies for nuclear weapons, including computer models of nuclear explosions or multipoint detonation systems. But the agreement does not specify who should verify Iran's compliance with that prohibition. "Our tools are limited," Amano told reporters in Vienna.

In light of the IAEA's uncertainty on the matter and the Security Council's attendant discord, the question of Iran's suspected nuclear weapons work could haunt the United States for years to come. Tehran has indicated that it might push the IAEA to give it a clean bill of health ahead of schedule, meaning confrontation over Parchin could arise regardless of any actions taken by the Trump administration in the short term. Alternatively, a future U.S. administration may be forced to press the issue when the nuclear deal's constraints begin to expire in 2023. At that point, Tehran will be legally allowed to produce nuclear fuel on an industrial scale, so the potential timeline for breaking out with a weapon could be shortened dramatically. "We always knew the issue of weaponization was likely to rear its head again," said a former Obama administration negotiator. "The question was always about the timing."

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