



Future Iran nuclear deal needs stronger verification

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This week's revelations that the International Atomic Energy Agency found traces of uranium at an undeclared nuclear site in Iran's Tehran Province — revelations which the regime has refused to explain — shows that the Iranian nuclear issue is far more complicated than U.S. and Iranian jockeying of recent days suggests.

The issue is not just whether to salvage the 2015 global nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic, as key Western European nations want, or to pressure Tehran to agree to re-write it, as President Donald Trump wants.

The tougher question is whether, in light of this week's revelations and prior suspicions by nuclear watchdogs that Iran was skirting the nuclear deal, the world can ever trust Tehran to fully comply with limits on its nuclear program.

As the atomic agency's findings make clear, any future nuclear deal must not only encompass a broader set of nuclear-related issues (e.g., Iran's ballistic missile program) but also include much stronger verification procedures, and guaranteed sanctions for violations, than those of the 2015 deal.

Even before this week's revelations, tensions were rising in Washington, Tehran and in European capitals over the future of the deal, which imposed temporary limits on Iranian nuclear activity in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions against the Iranian regime.

Reflecting his harsh assessment of the deal, which had been concluded on President Obama's watch, President Trump formally pulled the U.S. out of the agreement in May of 2018. Since then, Great Britain, France, and Germany have sought to salvage the pact by convincing Tehran to continue complying. Tehran, however, is openly violating more and more provisions because Washington has imposed growing economic sanctions under President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, while Europe has not fulfilled Tehran's request for ways to evade them.

Even before this week, rising tensions between Washington and Tehran, and their tit-for-tat actions against one another, had left the deal in a more precarious state.

Earlier this month, President Trump imposed new sanctions on Iran's shipping network and on individuals and entities affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, which helps to ship Iranian oil.

Tehran, in turn, has announced over the last two months that it will exceed the deal's limit on nuclear fuel stockpiles, enrich uranium at higher levels of purity (thus, closer to nuclear weapons-grade) than allowed, and ignore limits on nuclear-related research and development.

This week's revelations about covert Iranian nuclear activity are bound to exacerbate Washington's concerns.

The controversy dates back to last year when, in a speech to the United Nations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged the International Atomic Energy Agency to investigate the site in question, saying it held "massive amounts" of equipment and material tied to Iran's nuclear program. When the agency did so, it gathered environmental samples that revealed traces of uranium.

Raising further eyebrows at the atomic agency as well as in Washington and Jerusalem, Iran has refused to fully comply with the agency's investigation of the site, the Wall Street Journal noted earlier this month.

Meanwhile, after Reuters reported the agency's findings of traces of uranium at the site in Tehran Province, Netanyahu held a news conference on Monday at Israel's Foreign Ministry to reveal what he called another secret nuclear-related warehouse — this one in Abadeh, in Iran's Fars Province.

As Netanyahu explained with a slide show, Tehran destroyed the site in Abadeh — where he said the regime "conducted experiments to develop nuclear weapons" — when it learned that Israel knew about it.

None of this should surprise us. After promising "anywhere, anytime" inspections to police the nuclear deal, President Obama and his team ended up settling for considerably less. As part of the final nuclear accord, the U.S. and other P5+1 powers accepted a protocol under which Iran has 24 days to comply with an International Atomic Energy Agency request to visit a suspected undeclared site, giving Tehran lots of time to move, hide, or destroy evidence of its nuclear progress. Nor did the deal provide any measures that would compel Tehran's compliance with the inspection request to begin with.

The holes in the nuclear deal, and Tehran's willingness to exploit them, suggest that any future global agreement must contain an inspection regime, and sanctions for non-compliance, that truly reassures the region and wider world that Iran will neither develop nor acquire nuclear weaponry.

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