

What the IAEA really found in Iran

The Persian Puzzle: Part II

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THE [REPORT Mohammed El-Baradei presented to the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors on September 2, 2005](#) represents the most recent assessment of Iran's nuclear programme made by the watchdog body. In this report, the Director-General sought to quantify the progress made in dealing with a number of adverse findings first brought to the Board's notice on November 15, 2004.

Those findings involved six instances of Iran's "failure to report" certain nuclear activities, mostly concerning enrichment and laser experimentation and including the import of uranium from China in 1991; two instances of "failure to declare" enrichment facilities; six instances of "failure to provide design information or updated design information" for certain facilities, and a general charge of "failure on many occasions to cooperate to facilitate the implementation of safeguards, as evidenced by extensive concealment activities."

Dr. El-Baradei then noted that Iran had taken a number of corrective actions as a result of which "the Agency was able by November 2004 to confirm certain aspects of Iran's declarations [related to conversion activities and laser enrichment], which ... would be followed up as matters of routine safeguards implementation." This was a major statement by the IAEA because, in effect, it was saying that much of the "concealment" the Iranians are accused of resorting to in the past had been effectively neutralised and was no longer a source of extra concern for the Agency.

If the IAEA was still not in a position to declare that Iran had no undeclared nuclear material and undeclared enrichment activities, this was for two sets of reasons. First, it was still assessing Iran's explanations for questions raised by it about the Gchine uranium mines and two long-since abandoned research projects into polonium (Po-210) and plutonium separation. Secondly, questions still remained on two important fronts. In the course of its visits to the not-yet-operational Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz and the Kalaye Electric Company in 2004, the IAEA had found trace amounts of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and low enriched uranium (LEU), giving rise to concerns that Iran had already begun enriching uranium — presumably at an undisclosed third location. The Iranians denied producing the HEU and LEU but the IAEA needed to satisfy itself. Moreover, the Agency felt it had yet to learn the full extent of Iranian research work on the P-2 gas centrifuge, the designs for which had been procured from the A.Q. Khan clandestine network.

After analysis of swipe samples, IAEA experts now say the HEU was Pakistani and presumably came to be in Natanz because imported centrifuge components were contaminated. The origin of the LEU contamination has yet to be established but there are

some indications it is of Russian provenance. As for the centrifuges themselves, the IAEA wants more documentation to convince itself that Iran is telling the truth about not pursuing any work on the P-2 design between 1995, when it first acquired the technology, and 2002, when it made modifications necessary for composite rotors. This, then, is the main outstanding question Iran needs to answer.

No threat to peace

Not only is Iran's failure in this regard far less dramatic than the American accusations of a "clandestine weapons programme" and of "deception," it also cannot conceivably be called a threat to international peace and security. Yes, the IAEA has yet to conclude there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran. But, as Dr. El-Baradei himself noted in his September 2 report, "the process of drawing such a conclusion, after an Additional Protocol is in force, under normal circumstances, is a time consuming process." Since the Agency believes Iran has had a "past pattern of concealment," this conclusion "can be expected to take longer than in normal circumstances."

In effect, Dr. El-Baradei was saying that the IAEA's inspectors should be allowed to do their work. For this, "Iran's full transparency is indispensable and overdue." What he did not — and could not — say was that the inspections process should not be short-circuited or politicised by interested parties. A case in point is the polonium-beryllium controversy, which Washington had hoped would emerge as Iran's proverbial smoking gun.

When asked about bismuth irradiation experiments it had conducted at the Teheran Research Reactor (TRR) between 1989 and 1993 to extract polonium, [Iran pointed out](#) that it had not been required to inform the IAEA under the safeguards agreement and that "in any case, details of the experiments were in the logbook of the TRR reactor, which has been safeguarded for 30 years." Polonium has many civilian applications but also plays a role, when combined with beryllium, as a neutron initiator in some nuclear weapon designs. Seizing on this, the U.S. insisted Iran had imported beryllium as well. When the IAEA investigated this and ruled out any such imports, U.S. officials planted stories about [how Dr. El-Baradei had "succumbed to Iranian pressure."](#) These stories were then used to build a campaign to deny him another term as Director-General, a campaign which ultimately failed.

Regardless of U.S. motivations, however, Iran, at the end of the day still has a responsibility to demonstrate to the world that it is in full compliance with its safeguards obligations. And the world has the right to satisfy itself that Iran is not planning to make nuclear weapons. Earlier this year, [Bruno Pellaud, former IAEA Deputy Director-General for safeguards](#), was asked by Swissinfo whether Iran was intent on building a nuclear bomb. "My impression is not," he replied, adding that "the IAEA says there is no evidence of a weapons programme." Dr. Pellaud then posed a rhetorical question — Is this naiveté? — and elaborated on his assessment: "My view is based on the fact that Iran took a major gamble in December 2003 by allowing a much more intrusive capability to the IAEA. If Iran had had a military programme they would not have allowed the IAEA to come under this Additional Protocol. They did not have to."

As matters stand, the only major unexplained issue is the extent of Iran's research work on the P-2 centrifuge. Even if the Agency's worst fears are true — that Iran actually worked on the P-2 design during that time — this matters only if that knowledge was used to set up another enrichment facility somewhere else in the country. Though this is unlikely,

especially given the rather modest achievements on display at Natanz (which itself was supposed to be a “concealed” facility), the Additional Protocol gives the IAEA a broad licence to inspect any facility it wishes. Using those powers — and relying on intelligence inputs from the U.S. — Agency inspectors recently visited military sites at Kolehduz, Lavisán, and Parchin. Nothing was found. If a secret enrichment plant exists, the enforcement of Iran’s safeguards and inspection obligations is a far better way to unearth it than the threat of sanctions.

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