

IAEA: Iran designing parts for nuclear weapons

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UN's atomic watchdog issues most critical report to date; information from Israeli agencies played key role in compiling document.

In the most critical and damning report of Iran's nuclear program to date, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tuesday that the Islamic Republic was working to develop a nuclear-weapon design and was conducting extensive research and tests that could only be relevant for such a weapon.

"The agency has serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program," the IAEA said in the report, which included a 13-page annex with key technical descriptions of its research. "The information indicates that Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device."

Israel played a key role in helping the IAEA compile the report, and over the years, its intelligence agencies provided critical information used in the document. Israel now hopes that the United States will use the report to push through a new regimen of sanctions against Tehran, including a focus on the Central Bank of Iran and the Iranian energy sector.

In the report, the IAEA reveals a list of Iranian research centers connected to the work on the nuclear weapons program.

The agency says that it frequently confronted Iran with information it had obtained from various IAEA member states – including documents seized from computers belonging to members of a black-market nuclear arms network that supplied technology to Tehran. The reference is likely to the Pakistani ring led by Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The report focuses on three main technical areas – the "green salt project," a name for a covert Iranian program to enrich military-grade uranium; the development and testing of high explosives; and the re-engineering of the payload chamber of ballistic missiles to be able to accommodate a nuclear warhead.

In the report, for example, the IAEA reveals that Iran was working on "exploding bridgewire detonators," which are fast-acting detonators required to create a nuclear explosion.

"Given their possible application in a nuclear explosive device, and the fact that there are limited civilian and conventional military applications for such technology, Iran's development of such detonators and equipment is a matter of concern," the report said.

One member state provided the agency with information about a “large-scale” test Iran conducted in 2003 to initiate a high explosive charge in the form of a hemispherical shell, the dimensions of which are consistent with the dimensions of a potential nuclear payload that can be installed on a Shahab-3 ballistic missile.

Work on this project was assisted, according to the IAEA, by a foreign expert, apparently a reference to a Russian scientist who worked with Iran from 1996 to 2002.

The scientist has been named in various media reports as Vyacheslav Danilenko.

Additional information in the report reveals that Iran has manufactured simulated nuclear explosive components using high-density materials such as tungsten to determine if its theoretical design of an implosion device is correct.

These high-explosive tests – referred to as “hydrodynamic experiments” – are conducted when fissile and nuclear components are replaced by surrogate materials.

The explosives chamber, the IAEA said, was constructed in a facility called Parchin in 2000.

The agency said it had obtained commercial satellite images of the facility showing the chamber built around a large cylindrical object. The chamber was designed to contain the detonation of up to 70 kilograms of high explosives, which would be suitable for carrying out nuclear weapons experiments.

The IAEA also said it had obtained evidence from a member state that Iran was working to manufacture small capsules called “neutron initiators,” which are placed in the center of the nuclear core and produce a burst of neutrons needed to create a fission chain reaction.

The area where the experiments were conducted was said to have been cleansed of contamination after the experiments had taken place. The IAEA said Iran allegedly worked on validating this process through 2010.

The agency said Iran appeared to have taken preparatory steps to conduct an underground nuclear weapons test. It said it had obtained a document in Farsi that related directly to the logistics and safety arrangements that would be necessary for conducting a nuclear test.

According to the report, Iran has started moving nuclear material to an underground facility for the pursuit of sensitive atomic activities, a development likely to add to Western suspicions Tehran is trying to build a weapon.

The document also said Iran had continued to stockpile low-enriched uranium (LEU) and one prominent US think-tank said it had enough of the material for four nuclear weapons if it refines it further.

The information that Iran last month moved a "large cylinder" with LEU to the Fordow subterranean site was included in the UN body's most comprehensive report

yet pointing to military aspects of Tehran's nuclear program.

Russia, Iran reject IAEA report

Iran rejected the report later Tuesday as “politically motivated.”

“The report of the International Atomic Energy Agency is unbalanced, unprofessional and politically motivated,” Ali Asghar Soltanieh, the country’s envoy to the agency, was quoted as saying.

The US and its allies are expected to seize on the report to press for more punitive sanctions on the major oil producer over its record of hiding sensitive nuclear activity, and lack of full cooperation with UN inspectors.

Soltanieh said the IAEA report “did not contain any new issue.”

“Despite Iran’s readiness for negotiations, the IAEA published the report... which will harm its reputation,” Soltanieh said.

Russia also criticized the report, saying it would dim hopes for dialogue with Tehran and could be meant to scuttle chances for a diplomatic solution.

In a sharply worded statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said the report had turned into a “source of a new increase in tension” over the program even before its release.

Russia said time was needed to study the report and emphasized it would not yet comment on the content.

Sanctions on oil, gas sector unlikely

The United States and its allies are expected to use the report to bolster their case for more punitive sanctions on Iran. But the tone of the Russian statement suggested its release could hurt that cause rather than help it.

“Today, as never before, it is important to keep public steps in line with the interests of progress toward a political and diplomatic resolution,” the ministry said.

A US official said his country might impose more sanctions on Iran, possibly on commercial banks or front companies, but was unlikely to go after its oil and gas sector or its central bank for now.

“I think you will see bilateral sanctions increasing,” the official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters.

“From our side, we are really looking to close loopholes wherever they may exist,” he added, noting that US sanctions were so comprehensive that “there is not a whole lot out there other than the oil and gas market, and you know how sensitive that is.”

“I don’t think we are there yet,” he added, referring to the possibility of the United

States seeking, via sanctions, to make it harder for Iran to export oil and gas, the mainstay of the Islamic Republic's economy.

The official also played down the chances of sanctioning Iran's central bank, which is the clearinghouse for much of its petroleum trade with the rest of the world and which Washington recently suggested was a possibility.

"That is off the table [for now]," said the US official.

"That could change, depending on what other players [think]. I don't want to rule that out, but it is not really currently on the table."