



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM ADVANCING DESPITE PANDEMIC

APRIL 2020

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Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, a key date passed largely unnoticed; 8 April is Iran's National Nuclear Technology Day and Tehran broadcast a series of advances to its nuclear program without the normal fanfare, ostensibly due to the coronavirus. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) [announced](#) it would unveil advanced domestically manufactured centrifuges that would soon come online at Iran's Natanz enrichment facility. AEOI Chief Salehi noted that research and development continue without any restrictions, including the stockpiling of enriched uranium and heavy water storage. For his part, President Rouhani maintained Iran's nuclear program was now more advanced than in 2015 when Tehran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Meanwhile, tensions between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have spiked. In early March, the IAEA released [two reports](#) criticizing Iran for its violations of the JCPOA since May 2019 and its non-cooperation with inspections. The report indicated Iran has stockpiled over 1,000 kg of low enriched uranium, more than three times higher than the 300 kg JCPOA limit. The report also confirmed Iran is enriching to 4.5 per cent, exceeding the 3.67 per cent enrichment permitted by the nuclear agreement, and has again begun enriching at the underground facility at Fordow after a three-year hiatus.

The IAEA also censured Iran for stonewalling requests to access three undisclosed locations where Iran allegedly conducted undeclared nuclear activity. One of the locations may be the site at Turqz Abad, Tehran, where the IAEA reported in November 2019 that it had discovered traces of [uranium](#). In January 2018, Mossad raided the [Turqz Abad facility](#) and exfiltrated a [massive archive](#) detailing Iran's clandestine nuclear weapons program known as "Project Amad."

In early April, the [Institute for Science and International Security](#) released a new report based on information from Israel's seizure of the nuclear archive, which outlined a secret effort to produce UF₆, the uranium gas injected into centrifuges, in the early 2000s as part of Project Amad. The Institute also announced it uncovered a previously [unknown site](#), a pilot plant to research, develop, and produce uranium metallurgy for building nuclear weapons. In the aggregate, these discoveries indicate Tehran was putting in place a nuclear weapons production industry, not just a development program.

OUTLOOK

Iran's leadership has consistently maintained it will never seek, develop, or acquire nuclear weapons. However, the extent of its past weapons program along with the extensive archive at Turqz Abad – documents which would preserve Iran's technical knowledge – belie this pledge. Indeed, over the mid to long-term, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and his hardline cohort in the IRGC may still harbour nuclear ambitions as the ultimate deterrent against adversaries, particularly the U.S. and Israel, and as an insurance policy to ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic.

Nevertheless, Tehran is unlikely to jumpstart its nuclear weapons project anytime soon, a move that almost certainly would elicit widespread international opprobrium and risk a large-scale U.S. and/or Israeli attack. Instead, Tehran is more likely to take additional, incremental measures such as enriching uranium to 20 per cent¹, further reduce its cooperation with the IAEA, or even withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in the absence of sanctions relief. The fact that Tehran has not yet taken these measures suggests it aims to keep the diplomatic option open in an effort to obtain an easing of sanctions, primarily from Europe. Nevertheless, Washington is unlikely to lift sanctions anytime soon, leaving the Europeans' hands tied, suggesting Tehran may again lash out as its economy continues to deteriorate and its domestic situation becomes increasingly untenable.

¹ This is well within Iran's capabilities and would cut by more than half the time it would take to enrich to weapons grade uranium (90+ per cent enriched).