

IAEA Data on Sensitive Iranian Stockpile Mislead News Media

By [Gareth Porter](#)

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News stories on the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report suggested new reasons to fear that Iran is closer to a “breakout” capability than ever before, citing a nearly 50-percent increase in its stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium and the installation of hundreds of additional centrifuges at the Fordow enrichment installation.

But the supposedly dramatic increase in the stockpile of uranium that could theoretically be used to enrich to weapons grade is based on misleading figures in the Nov. 16 IAEA report. The actual increase in the level of that stockpile appears to be 20 percent.

The coverage of the completion of the installation of 2,800 centrifuges at Fordow, meanwhile, continued the media practice of ignoring the linkage between large numbers of idle centrifuges and future negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme.

The latest round of media coverage of the Iran issue again highlights the failure of major news outlets to reflect the complexity and political subtleties of the Iranian enrichment programme.

The IAEA report created understandable confusion about the stockpile of uranium enriched to 20-percent – also called 20 percent LEU (low enriched uranium). It does not use the term “stockpile” at all. Instead, it says Iran produced 43 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium during the three months since the August report and cited a total of 135 kg of 20-percent uranium now “in storage”, compared with only 91.4 kg in August.

Based on those figures, Reuters suggested that Iran might already be two-thirds of the way to the level of 200-250 kg that “experts say” could be used to build a bomb. The Guardian’s Julian Borger wrote that Iran was enriching uranium at a pace that would reach the Israeli “red line” in just seven months.

But analysis of the figures in the last two reports shows that the IAEA total for 20-percent LEU “in storage” actually includes 20-percent LEU that has been sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant in Esfahan for conversion to powder for fuel plates to be used by Iran’s medical reactor but not yet converted.

The November IAEA report includes the information that, as of Sep. 26 – six weeks after the data in the August report were collected – the total amount of 20-percent LEU fed into conversion process in Esfahan stood at 82.7 kg.

That figure is 11.5 kg more than the total of 71.25 kg fed into the conversion process as of the August report.

The difference between the two indicates that 11.5 kg had been taken out of the stockpile and sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant at Esfahan during September 2012.

In another indicator of the difference between the IAEA's "in storage" figure and the actual stockpile size, the current IAEA report gives the figure of 73.7 kg of 20-percent LEU from the Fordow facility "withdrawn and verified" by the IAEA over the entire period of such enrichment. That total is 23.7 kg higher than the total of 50 kg from Fordow "withdrawn and verified" given in the August report.

A total of 23.7 kg of 20-percent LEU was evidently taken out of the stockpile available for higher level enrichment and sent for conversion to powder for fuel plates during the last quarter.

The current IAEA report nevertheless uses the same overall total of 96.3 kg of 20-percent LEU fed into the conversion process that it used in the August report.

Subtracting the 23.7 kg additional uranium "withdrawn and verified" by the IAEA during the quarter from the total 20-percent enriched uranium production of 43 kg during the quarter reduces the amount added to the stockpile of 20-percent LEU to 19.3 kg.

Adding the 19.3 kg to the August total of 91.4 kg gives a total for the stockpile of 110.7 kg – a 20-percent increase over the August level rather than the nearly 50-percent increase suggested by news stories.

The IAEA declined to respond to the substance of an IPS e-mail query citing the apparent inconsistencies in the data presented in the last two reports. IAEA Press Officer Greg Webb said in an e-mail that safeguards department officials who had been sent the query "reply that the report is clear and accurate as it stands".

However, the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, D.C., which normally supports everything in IAEA reports, said in a Nov. 16 commentary that the current report "does not make it clear if Iran has sent additional near 20 percent LEU hexafluoride to the Esfahan conversion site after August 2012."

The Washington think tank added, "However, it if did, the near 20 percent LEU remains in the form of hexafluoride." The comment implied that the IAEA may have included 23.7 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant during the quarter as being "in storage".

The IAEA report also said Iran had halted its conversion of 20-percent LEU for fuel plates during the quarter, although it did not indicate how long the halt might last.

Reuters cited that halt as "another potentially worrying development". But in light of the actual level of the stockpile, that halt could simply reflect the fact that Tehran is content to keep the figure from rising too far above 100 kg.

The spokesman for the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, Hossein Naqavi, said Oct. 6 that Iran was taking "a serious and concrete confidence-building measure" by converting some of the 20-percent LEU into powder for fuel plates.

More surprisingly, an Israel official leaked to an Israeli daily that Iran was believed to have consciously avoided allowing its stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium to go much beyond 110 kg by diverting much of it for conversion to fuel for its scientific research reactor.

Citing “defense sources”, Ha’aretz military correspondent Amos Harel wrote Oct. 9 that the Israeli policymakers had new information they considered “highly reliable” that each time new production of 20-percent enriched uranium could have brought the total above 130 kg, Iran had “diverted 15 or 20 kg to scientific use”.

Harel indicated that the new information was the justification for the Israeli position that the threat of Iranian threat of a breakout capability had receded for many months.

Media coverage of the addition of the last of 2,800 centrifuges added to Fordow enrichment facility over the past year played up the idea that the centrifuges could become operational at any time. “They can be started any day,” a “senior diplomat” from an unnamed country was quoted by Reuters as saying.

The fact that half of those centrifuges have not been put into operation was treated as a mystery. The Los Angeles Times said, “For unknown reasons, Iran has not begun feeding uranium hexafluoride gas into more than half of the machines....”

None of the stories mentioned the obvious connection between Iran’s continuing to add centrifuges but not putting them into operation and its maneuvering for a deal with the United States.

Iran has been suggesting both publicly and privately throughout 2012 that it is open to an agreement under which it would halt all 20-percent enrichment and agree to other constraints on its enrichment programme in return for relief from harsh economic sanctions now levied on the Iranian economy.

Iranian strategists evidently view the unused enrichment capacity at Fordow facility as an incentive for the United States and the P5+1 to seek such an agreement.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

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