

Keeping Iran Honest

Iran's secret nuclear plant will spark a new round of IAEA inspections and lead to a period of even greater transparency

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It was very much a moment of high drama. [Barack Obama](#), fresh from his history-making stint hosting the UN security council, took a break from his duties at the [G20](#) economic summit in Pittsburgh to [announce the existence of a secret, undeclared nuclear facility in Iran](#) which was inconsistent with a peaceful nuclear programme, underscoring the president's conclusion that "[Iran is breaking rules that all nations must follow](#)".

Obama, backed by [Gordon Brown](#) and [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), threatened tough sanctions against Iran if it did not fully comply with its obligations concerning the international monitoring of its nuclear programme, which at the present time is being defined by the US, Britain and France as requiring an immediate suspension of all nuclear-enrichment activity.

The facility in question, said to be located on a secret Iranian military installation outside of the holy city of Qom and capable of housing up to 3,000 centrifuges used to enrich uranium, had been monitored by the intelligence services of the US and other nations for some time. But it wasn't until Monday that the IAEA found out about its existence, based not on any intelligence "scoop" provided by the US, but rather [Iran's own voluntary declaration](#). Iran's actions [forced the hand of the US](#), leading to Obama's hurried press conference Friday morning.

Beware politically motivated hype. While on the surface, Obama's dramatic intervention seemed sound, the devil is always in the details. The "rules" Iran is accused of breaking are not vague, but rather spelled out in clear terms. In accordance with Article 42 of Iran's [Safeguards Agreement](#), and Code 3.1 of the General Part of the Subsidiary Arrangements (also known as the "additional protocol") to that agreement, Iran is obliged to inform the IAEA of any decision to construct a facility which would house operational centrifuges, and to provide preliminary design information about that facility, even if nuclear material had not been introduced. This would initiate a process of complementary access and design verification inspections by the IAEA.

This agreement was signed by Iran in December 2004. However, since the "additional protocol" has not been ratified by the Iranian parliament, and as such is not legally binding, Iran had viewed its implementation as being voluntary, and as such agreed to comply with these new measures as a confidence building measure more so than a mandated obligation.

In March 2007, Iran suspended the implementation of the modified text of Code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements General Part concerning the early provisions of design information. As such, Iran was reverting back to its legally-binding requirements of the original safeguards agreement, which did not require early declaration of nuclear-capable facilities

prior to the introduction of nuclear material.

While this action is understandably vexing for the IAEA and those member states who are desirous of full transparency on the part of Iran, one cannot speak in absolute terms about Iran violating its obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. So when Obama announced that “Iran is breaking rules that all nations must follow”, he is technically and legally wrong.

There are many ways to interpret Iran’s decision of March 2007, especially in light of today’s revelations. It should be underscored that what the Qom facility Obama is referring to is not a [nuclear weapons](#) plant, but simply a nuclear enrichment plant similar to that found at the declared (and inspected) facility in Natanz.

The Qom plant, if current descriptions are accurate, cannot manufacture the basic feed-stock (uranium hexafluoride, or UF₆) used in the centrifuge-based enrichment process. It is simply another plant in which the UF₆ can be enriched.

Why is this distinction important? Because the IAEA has underscored, again and again, that it has a full accounting of Iran’s nuclear material stockpile. There has been no diversion of nuclear material to the Qom plant (since it is under construction). The existence of the alleged enrichment plant at Qom in no way changes the nuclear material balance inside Iran today.

Simply put, Iran is no closer to producing a hypothetical nuclear weapon today than it was prior to Obama’s announcement concerning the Qom facility.

One could make the argument that the existence of this new plant provides Iran with a “breakout” capability to produce highly-enriched uranium that could be used in the manufacture of a nuclear bomb at some later date. The size of the Qom facility, alleged to be capable of housing 3,000 centrifuges, is not ideal for large-scale enrichment activity needed to produce the significant quantities of low-enriched uranium Iran would need to power its planned nuclear power reactors. As such, one could claim that its only real purpose is to rapidly cycle low-enriched uranium stocks into highly-enriched uranium usable in a nuclear weapon. The fact that the Qom facility is said to be located on an Iranian military installation only reinforces this type of thinking.

But this interpretation would still require the diversion of significant nuclear material away from the oversight of IAEA inspectors, something that would be almost immediately evident. Any meaningful diversion of nuclear material would be an immediate cause for alarm, and would trigger robust international reaction, most probably inclusive of military action against the totality of Iran’s known nuclear infrastructure.

Likewise, the 3,000 centrifuges at the Qom facility, even when starting with 5% enriched uranium stocks, would have to operate for months before being able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a single nuclear device. Frankly speaking, this does not constitute a viable “breakout” capability.

Iran has, in its declaration of the Qom enrichment facility to the IAEA on 21 September, described it as a [“pilot plant”](#). Given that Iran already has a “pilot enrichment plant” in operation at its declared facility in Natanz, this obvious duplication of effort points to either a parallel military-run nuclear enrichment programme intended for more nefarious

purposes, or more likely, an attempt on the part of Iran to provide for strategic depth and survivability of its nuclear programme in the face of repeated threats on the part of the US and Israel to bomb its nuclear infrastructure.

Never forget that sports odds makers were [laying 2:1 odds that either Israel or the US would bomb Iran's nuclear facilities by March 2007](#). Since leaving office, former vice-president [Dick Cheney has acknowledged that he was pushing heavily for a military attack](#) against Iran during the time of the Bush administration. And the level of rhetoric coming from Israel concerning its plans to launch a pre-emptive military strike against Iran have been alarming.

While Obama may have sent conciliatory signals to Iran concerning the possibility of rapprochement in the aftermath of his election in November 2008, this was not the environment faced by Iran when it made the decision to withdraw from its commitment to declare any new nuclear facility under construction. The need to create a mechanism of economic survival in the face of the real threat of either US or Israeli military action is probably the most likely explanation behind the Qom facility. Iran's declaration of this facility to the IAEA, which predates Obama's announcement by several days, is probably a recognition on the part of Iran that this duplication of effort is no longer representative of sound policy on its part.

In any event, the facility is now out of the shadows, and will soon be subjected to a vast range of IAEA inspections, making any speculation about Iran's nuclear intentions moot. Moreover, Iran, in declaring this facility, has to know that because it has allegedly placed operational centrifuges in the Qom plant (even if no nuclear material has been introduced), there will be a need to provide the IAEA with full access to Iran's centrifuge manufacturing capability, so that a material balance can be acquired for these items as well.

Rather than representing the tip of the iceberg in terms of uncovering a covert nuclear weapons capability, the emergence of the existence of the Qom enrichment facility could very well mark the initiation of a period of even greater transparency on the part of Iran, leading to its full adoption and implementation of the IAEA additional protocol. This, more than anything, should be the desired outcome of the "Qom declaration".

Calls for "crippling" sanctions on Iran by Obama and Brown are certainly not the most productive policy options available to these two world leaders. Both have indicated a desire to strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Iran's action, in declaring the existence of the Qom facility, has created a window of opportunity for doing just that, and should be fully exploited within the framework of IAEA negotiations and inspections, and not more bluster and threats from the leaders of the western world.

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