

U.S. built major Iranian nuclear facility

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In the heart of Tehran sits one of Iran's most important nuclear facilities, a dome-shaped building where scientists have conducted secret experiments that could help the country build atomic bombs. It was provided to the Iranians by the United States.

The Tehran Research Reactor represents a little-known aspect of the international uproar over the country's alleged weapons program. Not only did the U.S. provide the reactor in the 1960s as part of a Cold War strategy, America also supplied the weapons-grade uranium needed to power the facility—fuel that remains in Iran and could be used to help make nuclear arms.

As the U.S. and other countries wrestle with Iran's refusal this week to curb its nuclear capabilities, an examination of the Tehran facility sheds light on the degree to which the United States has been complicit in Iran developing those capabilities.

Though the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, has found no proof Iran is building a bomb, the agency says the country has repeatedly concealed its nuclear activities from inspectors. And some of these activities have taken place in the U.S.-supplied reactor, IAEA records show, including experiments with uranium, a key material in the production of nuclear weapons.

U.S. officials point to these activities as evidence Iran is trying to construct nuclear arms, but they do not publicly mention that the work has taken place in a U.S.-supplied facility.

The U.S. provided the reactor when America was eager to prop up the shah, who also was aligned against the Soviet Union at the time. After the Islamic revolution toppled the shah in 1979, the reactor became a reminder that in geopolitics, today's ally can become tomorrow's threat.

Also missing from the current debate over Iran's nuclear intentions is emerging evidence that its research program may be more troubled than previously known.

The Bush administration has portrayed the program as a sophisticated operation that has skillfully hid its true mission of making the bomb. But in the case of the Tehran Research Reactor, a study by a top Iranian scientist suggests otherwise.

After a serious accident in 2001 at the U.S.-supplied reactor, the scientist concluded that poor quality control at the facility was a "chronic disease." Problems included carelessness, sloppy bookkeeping and a staff so poorly trained that workers had a weak understanding of "the most basic and simple principles of physics and mathematics," according to the study, presented at an international nuclear conference in 2004 in France.

The Iranian scientist, Morteza Gharib, told the Tribune that management of the facility had improved in the past three years. When asked whether sloppiness at the reactor might have contributed to some of Iran's troubles with the IAEA, Gharib wrote in an email: "It is always possible, for any system, to commit infractions inadvertently due to lack of proper bookkeeping."

Jeffrey Lewis, an arms control expert at Harvard University, said bungling might be to blame for some infractions, but the Iranians clearly concealed major nuclear activities, such as building a facility to enrich uranium. "This was not an oversight," he said.

Another overlooked concern about the Tehran reactor is the weapons-grade fuel the U.S. provided Iran in the 1960s—about 10 pounds of highly enriched uranium, the most valuable material to bomb makers. It is still at the reactor and susceptible to theft, U.S. scientists familiar with the situation said.

This uranium has already been burned in the reactor, but the "spent fuel" is still highly enriched and could be used in a bomb. Normally, spent fuel is so radioactive that terrorists cannot handle it without causing themselves great harm. But the spent fuel in Iran has sat in storage for so long that it is probably no longer highly radioactive and could be handled easily, the U.S. scientists say.

The fuel is about one-fifth the amount needed to make a nuclear weapon, but experts said it could be combined with other material to construct a bomb.

In an interview, Linton Brooks, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, an arm of the U.S. Energy Department, said the U.S. would like to retrieve the U.S.-supplied fuel, but the top priority has been to get Iran to suspend its enrichment efforts.

Under the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. But the UN Security Council, saying Iran has failed to prove it is not building weapons, has demanded Iran stop enrichment by Aug. 31 or face economic sanctions. This week, Iran offered "serious talks" on its nuclear activities but did not promise to stop enriching uranium.

While Brooks downplayed the proliferation risk of the Tehran Research Reactor, some experts believe the facility is so important to Iran's nuclear program that it would be targeted in a U.S. military strike on Iran.

"Its purpose is mainly advanced training and producing a cadre of nuclear engineers," said Paul Rogers, an arms control expert at the University of Bradford in England. "So it's one of the facilities that is really quite significant."

Exactly how significant is unclear. The Tehran reactor provided the foundation for Iran's nuclear program, but that program now consists of numerous other facilities as well. And over the years, Iran has obtained nuclear aid from various sources, including Russia and the black market network of Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan. China also has supplied research reactors.

Most of the world's nuclear research reactors, which train students or produce radioisotopes for medicine, fall under IAEA restrictions. Agency inspectors have visited the Tehran facility several times in recent years. Iran says its nuclear program, including the U.S.-supplied reactor, is solely for peaceful purposes.

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