



Additional Centrifuge Plants: Update

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In November 2013, Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reached agreement called the Framework for Cooperation which established a step-by-step process to address the IAEA's outstanding concerns about Iran's nuclear programs, particularly about their alleged military dimensions and the construction of secret nuclear sites and capabilities.¹ One measure agreed between the parties in November 2013 was that Iran would clarify its announcement regarding additional enrichment facilities, in particular the possible construction of a third gas centrifuge plant.

Background

Over the last several years, Iranian officials have announced in the media plans to build up to ten gas centrifuge plants. Construction of one of the centrifuge plants could have started last summer, based on a literal reading of past public statements by senior Iranian officials. On August 16, 2010, then nuclear head Ali Akbar Salehi claimed that "studies for the location of 10 other uranium enrichment facilities" had ended, and that "the construction of one of these facilities will begin by the end of the (current Iranian) year (March 2011) or start of the next year." Succeeding nuclear head Fereydoun Abbassi-Davani said in mid-2011 that construction on additional enrichment plants was delayed by two years.

Given the concern that Iran may build a secret another centrifuge plant, it is not surprising the IAEA has sought clarification about these public statements and Iran's plans. Iran has committed in the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) that it will not construct a centrifuge plant during the six month implementation period. This commitment has yet to be fully verified, as would any Iranian statement that it is not building another centrifuge plant.

Iran's Statements to IAEA on Centrifuge Plants

The February 20, 2014 IAEA safeguards report states that Iran clarified its prior announcement that it had decided to construct ten additional uranium enrichment facilities. Iran informed the IAEA that preliminary site selections for five such facilities had started but not been "finalized" and that the "successful development of new type of gas centrifuge machines" had "provided the timing flexibility before conducting next steps." Iran also stated that "for the first step time-bound (six months) [under

¹ David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *Iran's Negotiating Track with the IAEA*, ISIS Report, November 26, 2013. <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/irans-negotiating-track-with-the-iaea/8>

the JPA], there will be no new location for enrichment other than those already existing at the Fordow and Natanz sites.”

The statement appears to that Iran has not yet started installing centrifuge equipment or centrifuges at any other site. (It may be installing small numbers of centrifuges at research and development sites, but that is a separate issue, and such installation would not constitute the construction of another centrifuge plant.) Moreover, the statement makes clear that Iran commits not to enrich uranium at any new site during the interim period of the JPA. But its statement does not fully clarify this issue.

Questions about Iran’s Statements

Iran has formally announced that it has delayed its plans to build several additional centrifuge plants, an improvement over the previous status quo. However, Iran’s statement to the IAEA is at best partial and more information is needed. There is a range of additional information needed to satisfactorily resolve this issue.

Iran did not make clear its previous or intended schedule to build these plants. Iran needs to provide the IAEA with its plans for these plants, including their planned construction schedule.

The IAEA needs to learn more about the status of the five enrichment sites. For example, Iran may have chosen already-built facilities, such as underground military facilities, that require little work before being outfitted as gas centrifuge plants. How much equipment, raw materials, and centrifuge components had Iran already procured or ordered for another centrifuge plant? Iran needs to purchase these goods well in advance of their installation; many goods have to be obtained overseas. The IAEA needs to learn if Iran was well into the ordering process for these plants.

Adequately satisfying this and other possible military dimensions issues

It is difficult to tell from the limited information in the IAEA report how Iran could be seen as having fully satisfied concerns about this past enrichment facilities announcement. To its credit, the IAEA said it is assessing the information provided by Iran and will request additional information as needed. One expects additional requests for information about the issue of new centrifuge plants.

In that effort and in its effort to investigate possible military dimensions (PMD) of Iran’s nuclear programs, the IAEA will need to exercise caution not to simply accept Iran’s benign explanations for past announcements regarding its nuclear intentions and capabilities. Deeper investigation and additional evidence for governments and publics is necessary to put to rest the concerns about Iran’s past or possibly on-going secret nuclear activities.

The IAEA also needs to be clearer about when it becomes satisfied with Iran’s answers. The February 21, 2014 Iran safeguards report includes many ambiguities about whether Iran has truly implemented the first set of steps under the Framework for Cooperation. The IAEA states:

“The Agency confirms that Iran has implemented these initial practical measures within the specified three-month period. The Agency is analysing the information provided by Iran and has requested additional clarifications of some of this information.”

If the IAEA has not yet completed the necessary analysis and may in fact need more information, then the issue is neither closed nor the step implemented. Iran may well exploit this ambiguity to deny the IAEA more information, claiming the issue is settled, and repeat this pattern with PMD issues.