Israel: IAEA Received Info About Suspected Iranian Nuclear Sites but Didn't Inspect Many of Them

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In 2016, a few months after the nuclear agreement with Iran went into effect, a Western entity gave the International Atomic Energy Agency information regarding sites the Islamic republic did not report as part of its nuclear program and where, according to suspicions, forbidden nuclear military research and development activity was being conducted, Israeli officials involved in the issue told Haaretz.

The Western entity also shared the information with a number of the six world powers who were party to the nuclear agreement, officials said.

The officials noted that almost all the suspected sites have not been visited by IAEA inspectors – either because of Iran’s refusal to grant entry or UN officials’ reluctance to confront Iran on the issue.

According to the Israeli officials, even when the Iranians granted inspectors access to the suspected sites, it only did so after a substantial amount of time had passed and it created significant obstacles.

The issue of Iran’s nuclear program is expected to be one of the main topics on the table when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Donald Trump meet in New York on Monday.

“At one point we saw there was no one to talk to,” said one of the Israeli officials. “There is a whole list of suspicious sites where the Iranians do not allow inspectors to visit and no one enforces the supervision mechanisms established in the nuclear agreement. There is simply a demonstration of weakness in the IAEA when it comes to Iran. The sense is that Iran allows what it wants, and does not allow what it does not want.”

The nuclear agreement between Iran and the world powers set up an oversight mechanism for a list of sites officially identified as part of Iran’s nuclear program. These include the heavy water facility in Arak, uranium enrichment plants in Natanz and Qom, as well as other sites like uranium mines and facilities for the production of centrifuges.

IAEA inspectors visited these sites for regular inspections even before the agreement was signed, and continue to do so even more now.

However, one of the issues Israel and the West are concerned about regarding the Iranian nuclear program regards the sites Tehran did not reveal, where there is suspected research and development for a military nuclear program.

These sites were supposed to be addressed by the IAEA and Iran as part of an agreed track called the “possible military dimensions” of its nuclear program.

An official noted that the Western entity identified, among others, a civilian Iranian site of potential illegal nuclear activity. IAEA inspectors asked Iran to visit the site, but the Iranians did not allow them to visit the site immediately, attempted to raise objections and created bureaucratic obstacles that caused the visit to be substantially delayed.

The officials said the Iranians refused to allow inspectors to visit a series of other suspicious sites, claiming they were military bases and, therefore, were not covered by the nuclear accord and that they were not required to allow access to inspectors.

The senior officials provided an example of a suspicious site IAEA inspectors had previously toured. According to the officials, the Western entity supplied information about the suspected site and suggested that it be reinspected. The inspectors then requested permission to revisit the location. However, the Iranians rejected the request and the visit idea was dropped, the officials said.

“There were a number of requests to the Iranians and there was a big mess. Finally, after a long time, they let the inspectors enter that lab and examine its contents,” they said.

The entity noted that this was a rare instance in which the Iranians did eventually allow a visit by IAEA inspectors. In other cases, it noted, the Iranians refused to allow inspectors to visit a series of other suspicious sites, claiming they were military bases and, therefore, not covered by the nuclear accord and that they were not required to allow access to inspectors.

According to an Israeli official, “When it comes to visits to suspicious sites, the agreement is not implemented. There are almost no visits and visitors are not allowed to visit. In this context, the agreement is not being realized in spirit and word.”

The Trump administration is party to Israeli criticism concerning the lack of adequate IAEA inspections of suspected Iranian sites.

In late August, after visiting IAEA headquarters in Vienna, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said she wanted to increase the agency’s inspections of suspected sites in Iran, including military bases. The agreement “does not distinguish between military and nonmilitary sites,” Haley said. “There are numerous undeclared sites that have not been inspected. That is a problem.”

The IAEA rejected Haley’s criticism at the time and said inspections were carried out at sites only if there was evidence to suggest suspected nuclear activity. “We’re not going to visit a military site like Parchin just to send a political signal,” a senior official at the IAEA told Reuters at the time. (It is suspected that Iran has carried out military nuclear research and development at this particular site.)

IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano referred to U.S. criticism in his address to the IAEA Board of Governors last Monday. “The nuclear-related commitments undertaken by Iran under the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] are being implemented. The Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of nuclear material declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement,” Amano said. “Evaluations regarding the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran remain ongoing.”

Senior officials in the prime minister’s delegation noted that Netanyahu will voice his strenuous objection to the nuclear accord and present concrete ideas for changing or canceling the agreement in both his meeting with Trump and his speech at the UN General Assembly the following day.

Members of Netanyahu’s team said that in his meeting with Trump, the premier will also raise concerns about Iran’s growing foothold in Syria.

On Friday, during Shabbat dinner with his delegation, Netanyahu said Israel would not tolerate an Iranian presence on its northern border. “The military presence endangers us as well as our Arab neighbors, and we have to act against it,” Netanyahu said. “I think that today Israel and its warnings are being taken seriously – as they should be.”