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# Leaving Iran's Nuclear Past a Mystery

By **DAVID E. SANGER** DEC. 3, 2015

VIENNA — The Iranian nuclear crisis began a decade ago when Tehran's leaders refused to answer questions from international inspectors about evidence that a secret team of scientists, working in a complex organization that sprawled across military and university laboratories, were experimenting with the technology to build a nuclear weapon.

Ten years of standoffs, sanctions, cyberattacks and negotiations followed.

Now, as the United States and its allies try to open a new chapter with Tehran — hoping to build on the deal reached in July limiting its production of nuclear fuel — the political environment is different. There is even talk of “coordination,” though not true cooperation, in fighting the Islamic State.

Yet as the final report of the International Atomic Energy Agency on the “possible military dimensions” of the Iranian nuclear program made clear on Wednesday, Iran's rulers are unwilling to give much more insight into evidence of their nuclear experimentation than they were before the historic nuclear deal was struck this summer. And for now at least, the Obama administration sees little need to force Tehran to provide answers to questions that, like the Bush administration before it, it once insisted could not remain unaddressed.

A public accounting of the full history, Secretary of State John Kerry and

other administration officials argue, no longer really matters. If the nuclear deal signed in July is fully implemented, Iran will have dismantled the infrastructure it would need to produce weapons-grade fuel for the next 15 years at least. Even the most sophisticated bomb blueprint is useless without that infrastructure, no matter what kind of weapon it designs.

Mr. Obama, aides say, concluded some time ago that preventing a nuclear-armed Iran in the future is far more important than trying to force it to admit to a program that it has long contended never existed. The atomic energy agency pushed as far as it could in that direction, dismissing as implausible Iran's explanations that the work was for a variety of nonnuclear projects. Its conclusion that Iran pursued computer modeling of nuclear explosions through 2009, Mr. Obama's first year in office, was a bit of a surprise: Many expected that the Iranian nonanswers would completely stymie the investigation.

Yet the decision to essentially close the file — expected to come at a meeting here of the agency's board this month, with the consent of the Obama administration — raises questions over whether the world's nuclear watchdog has lost its ability to strike fear into nations secretly pursuing the bomb. If Iran could avoid fully answering many of the questions about 12 different technologies it was pursuing, will it be emboldened to stiff-arm inspectors as they seek to enforce the nuclear deal? And what about other states, such as Saudi Arabia and Japan, that might be interested in developing nuclear weapons at some point?

“I worry we have created a poor precedent for the future,” one senior agency official said before the report was distributed on Wednesday. “We have no way to force states to come clean, and never have,” added the official, who was granted anonymity because he was not allowed to speak to the news media. “We only have the moral authority that comes from making sure they do.”

Even after a decade of work, significant mysteries remain. Eight years ago, the United States intelligence agencies published a conclusion that Iran had a full-scale version of the Manhattan Project until 2003, and believed other work continued later.

This year, Mr. Kerry said that a full confession by Iran was unnecessary because American intelligence agencies already had “perfect knowledge” of Iran’s past activities, a statement that the intelligence agencies themselves thought was a bit generous about their understanding. But in private assessments given to Mr. Obama, the C.I.A. and the Energy Department say they have plenty of data to create a “baseline” of Iran’s abilities to produce a weapon if it ever got hold of enough plutonium or highly enriched uranium by cheating on the accord.

“A number of observers will be disturbed that Iran appears to be getting away with the big lie, benefiting from sanctions relief while stonewalling the investigation,” Robert Einhorn, a former State Department official who was involved in nuclear negotiations with Iran, wrote in *The National Interest* this week.

But Mr. Einhorn wrote that he was not alarmed because the nuclear agreement with Iran “provides significant tools to prevent future weaponization activities,” including an explicit prohibition on nuclear explosive modeling and research on systems to initiate a nuclear chain reaction and to turn uranium into metal. In other words, the steps to building a bomb that the International Atomic Energy Agency was most concerned about are explicitly prohibited.

Other American officials say that out of an abundance of caution, they have worked from the assumption that if Iran got weapons-grade nuclear fuel, it already knows just about everything it needs to fashion it into a bomb. “It is unlikely that anything the Iranians might say about past weaponization efforts would affect U.S. planning to stop an Iranian breakout,” Mr. Einhorn wrote,

using the phrase for racing to produce a weapon, “especially because whatever they said would hardly be taken at face value.”

Iran would hardly be the first to skip the stop at the atomic confessional. South Africa never revealed much about the secret projects that enabled it to produce nuclear weapons, which it gave up long ago. Neither did South Korea, which was caught by the United States decades ago, apparently seeking a bomb capability to match North Korea's.

But Iran is a special case, and especially complex. The Obama administration maintains that the country hardly got off without penalty. Its economy suffered years of sanctions and hundreds of billions of dollars in lost oil revenues. It was perceived as an international outlaw, and ultimately had to agree to dismantle much of its capacity to enrich uranium and produce plutonium. For the next 15 years, it is under heavy constrictions.

But as former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell once remarked, “you can't bomb knowledge.” And it is the depth of Iran's knowledge about the art of nuclear weapons production that remains, a decade later, one of many mysteries about the country's plans for the future.

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