Ex-top IAEA official warns of clandestine Iranian nuke sites

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Iran may be hiding as many as five underground clandestine nuclear sites from the IAEA, former deputy director-general for Safeguards at the International Atomic Energy Agency Olli Heinonen has told The Jerusalem Post.

Heinonen, one of the world’s leading nuclear experts, noted that it is known that some time ago Iran was considering 10 underground locations for new nuclear facilities, and that it had performed a more in-depth review of five of the locations.

“I don’t think they have told the IAEA where those five places are... how ready are” the five sites, he said following a conference in Tel Aviv hosted by the Israel Intelligence and Heritage Commemoration Center.

All of these observations were part of a comprehensive and rare insider discussion by Heinonen about exactly how Iran could break out to a nuclear weapon, from a technical perspective.

Heinonen made waves last week when he warned KAN Radio that Iran could make enough material for a nuclear weapon in six to eight months.

What would Iran actually need to do to get to that point, and to get to the point of actually firing a nuclear missile? What is the scale of the dangers and the scope of possible unknown nuclear activities Iran might be undertaking to shorten the “breakout” time to deploying a nuclear weapon?

There are at least two clocks to watch. One is how much time Iran would need to enrich sufficient uranium for a nuclear bomb.
How does Heinonen arrive at his estimate of six to eight months?

He said that the main problem is not Iran’s advanced centrifuges, of which the IAEA reported on May 31 that Tehran is running too many.

According to various understandings between the Islamic republic and the IAEA, Heinonen said that Tehran at this stage should not be operating more than around 10 IR-6 centrifuges, far more advanced than its main centrifuge, the IR-1.

Even around 2025, the ceiling for Iran to operate IR-6s is set at 30, and the IAEA report said that Tehran is already operating 33.
While concerning, Heinonen thinks that the world powers should not press the Islamic republic on the issue, as even a few hundred IR-6s would not significantly change the Islamic republic’s projected breakout time.

Currently, Iran is operating around 6,000 of its approximately 19,000 IR-1 centrifuges, which it was operating before the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Heinonen said for Iran to cut the time to develop enough uranium from a nuclear weapon from six to eight months (for which he said it would likely need to jump to around 10,000 IR-1s operating) to around four months, it would need to be operating around 15,000 of its IR-1s.

Since he estimated that the Islamic republic might only be able to reactivate about 1,000 additional centrifuges per month, his six-to-eight month timetable – let alone four months – seems tough to understand.

But the former IAEA official explained that the biggest variable which could help Iran dash forward is not merely by reactivating many IR-1s or by hoping to operate more IR-6s (of which it has very low numbers), but with the IR-2s.

Here, Iran may have a few thousand IR-2s, and Heinonen said that since they are four times as powerful as IR-1s, even 2,000 IR-2s would have the impact of 8,000 IR-1s.

Using IR-2s means that Iran could obtain the effect of 15,000 IR-1s or even more than 20,000 IR-1s in only a few months, which would drastically reduce breakout time.

Yet some analysts would say this is not the real breakout timeline. Some say that even once Iran has enough material for a nuclear bomb, they would still need additional time – maybe up to two years – to master explosive aspects of the bomb and getting its ballistic missiles to successfully deliver a bomb. This is a whole separate clock.

Heinonen said that while such comments could be correct, Iran could also work on both uranium enrichment and nuclear weapon explosive-delivery challenges in tandem, so that the clocks are running at the same time.

Part of what worries Heinonen is that “no one is investigating what is the real status of [Iran’s] missile delivery systems. There is no monitoring... it is not part of the JCPOA... that it left out the missile part was unfortunate. Our knowledge is very limited and only based on human intelligence and maybe some signal intelligence,” such that guesses about how long it will take Iran to properly fire a ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead (instead of a conventional one) range wildly.

His concern was that it could be as short as six to 12 months, in which case Tehran could complete those preparations at the same time that it finished enriching enough uranium for a bomb.

In addition, he said that “we don’t know if there are additional places where there are centrifuges” besides the Natantz and Fordow facility, where IAEA inspectors are allowed to carry out inspections.

More sites could mean more centrifuges and a shorter breakout time period.

Once enough uranium for a weapon is enriched, Heinonen said that Iran could move rapidly and would need only “two weeks to one month to turn high energy uranium into nuclear weapons components.”

What does he think will happen on Iran’s 60-day deadline of July 7 for the world to help the Islamic republic’s economy improve?
Heinonen said he expected that Tehran would try violating the JCPOA some more by gradually increasing the number of centrifuges it uses, but without doing so suddenly or blatantly in a way that would look like a dash for a bomb. This way, Iran will be able to see if the world powers “blink” rather than opt for a conflict.

Predicting that “the EU won’t withdraw from the JCPOA, even at that point at they will say the deal is still ‘better than nothing.’”
He said that this was exactly the tactic Iran took during the earlier 2005 nuclear negotiations with various world powers.
How much time on the clock would Heinonen find unacceptable? He said that once Iran would stood only six months from a bomb, the situation would be intolerable.

Not that Heinonen is anxious for a preemptive strike by the US or Israel on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Rather, he said, he believes that if Iran started to get much closer to a bomb, even Russia and China would not tolerate the situation because it would impact the price and supply of oil.

Furthermore, he is concerned that if Iran is using any of the five mentioned locations for new clandestine nuclear facilities, they may be situated so far underground that destroying them may be difficult – “it will not be a piece of cake.”

Heinonen said he was hopeful that if Iran was getting close to a weapon, Russian and Chinese pressure would open up “other tools to keep them at bay” to crossing the nuclear finish line.