

Middle East Developments Overshadow the IAEA Conference

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Sep 17, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alttwrat-fy-alshrq-alawst-tlqy-bzlaaha-ly-mwtmr-alwkalt-aldwlyt-lltaqt-aldhryt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alttwrat-fy-alshrq-alawst-tlqy-bzlaaha-ly-mwtmr-alwkalt-aldwlyt-lltaqt-aldhryt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker Senior Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

Iranian missiles for Russia, Houthi attacks on Israel, and North Korea's surprise display of centrifuges have quickly changed the atmosphere of the nuclear agency's annual meeting.

On September 16-20, delegates from the 178 member states of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are meeting in Vienna to discuss the organization's progress in promoting the peaceful use of nuclear technology. The IAEA is also responsible for checking that non-nuclear weapon states who have signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) are not using such technology for military purposes. Hence the agency's keen interest in Iran, an NPT signatory whose avowedly "peaceful" enrichment program is on the cusp (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iaea-censure-risks-iranian-escalation>) of having enough high-enriched uranium for several atomic bombs.

In the lead-up to the annual meeting, IAEA director-general Rafael Grossi previewed some of the issues that agency members will discuss this week. On September 9, he told (<https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/director-general-briefs-board-on-role-of-iaea-diplomacy-in-ukraine-iran-and-syria-and-more>) the IAEA Board of Governors about his latest trip to Ukraine, where the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is now controlled by Russia. He warned that "no nuclear power plant, no matter where it's located, should be a military target." He also updated the board on Iran, which had displayed "completely unsatisfactory" cooperation with IAEA inspectors during his visit in May but now seemed "very constructive and open to an engagement with the Agency," according to recent correspondence with the new government of President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Yet a rapid series of developments in the past few days promises to further complicate the agency's diplomacy with Russia and Iran and its wider nonproliferation mission. On September 12, President Vladimir Putin warned that

NATO countries would be “at war” with Russia if they supply long-range missiles to Ukraine—a warning that some interpreted as a hint of Moscow’s readiness to use tactical nuclear weapons. The following day, the European Union condemned Iran’s transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia, noting that it “represents substantive material escalation from the provision of Iranian UAVs and ammunition, which Russia has used in its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine.” The United States, Britain, France, and Germany have now imposed new sanctions on Iran, though the **potential efficacy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/easier-said-done-renewing-maximum-pressure-iran>)** of these measures—which include restrictions on Iran Air, travel bans, and asset freezes—is uncertain.

Elsewhere, North Korea released photos on September 13 of leader Kim Jong-un visiting an apparently new uranium enrichment plant. (Pyongyang reprocesses plutonium for its nuclear arsenal but has also operated a uranium enrichment plant using efficient Pakistani P-2 centrifuges since at least 2010.) Although the country is no longer an IAEA member, its activities remain a key point of concern for the agency—both as a general proliferation challenge and because of the regime’s known nuclear and military cooperation with Iran and other actors. Two days after the North Korean announcement, the Yemeni Houthis launched another attack on Israel, this time reaching the center of the country with a long-range missile almost certainly supplied by their top ally, Iran.

Although the IAEA’s remit does not cover missiles, at least some of the weapons involved in these latest controversies could conceivably be used as delivery systems for nuclear weapons. During President Biden’s September 13 White House meeting with British prime minister Keir Starmer, the two leaders **reportedly discussed (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/14/alarm-in-uk-and-us-over-possible-iran-russia-nuclear-deal>)** concerns that Moscow had shared nuclear secrets with Tehran in return for Iran supplying missiles to restock munitions expended against Ukraine. At a press conference with the British foreign secretary a few days earlier, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, “Russia is sharing technology that Iran seeks...including on nuclear issues as well as some space information.” (Notably, Tehran’s space program is closely intertwined with its military research on long-range ballistic missiles.)

The agenda for this week’s IAEA conference was **set in June (<https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gc/gc68-1.pdf>)** and may not allow for formal discussion of these new circumstances. Technically, the agency could respond next week when the Board of Governors meets again. Although the IAEA generally emphasizes cooperation and diplomacy, the board has censured certain member states for lack of cooperation or other concerns. These resolutions are not legally binding, but they send a strong political and diplomatic message. The agency is somewhat constrained by the fact that Russia and China have permanent board seats and tend to oppose motions supported by the United States, whether against Iran or on other issues. But they cannot block the board’s decisions on their own.

In June, for example, the IAEA censured Iran for failing to cooperate fully with the agency. Twenty of the board’s thirty-five members voted for the resolution while only Russia and Iran opposed it. (Twelve members reportedly abstained during the closed-door proceedings, and one did not vote.) Aside from issuing another censure resolution and potentially garnering more yea votes this time, the agency has no options for tougher action. The United States or other members could attempt to take separate action at the UN Security Council, but Moscow and Beijing do have veto power there and would presumably shoot down any proposed resolution against Iran. Washington and European capitals could protest that veto, but this would have little or no practical impact.

After his meeting with Biden, Starmer stated that the two leaders had a “wide ranging discussion about strategy.” His vague wording and the lack of a formal joint statement were interpreted as a way for the two allies to signal close bilateral cooperation on the issue while keeping Moscow guessing. Britain clearly took the role of junior partner here, in part because some of the British missiles Ukraine has requested have U.S. components. But Biden and Starmer appear to be very much on the same page—including in their emphasis on diplomatic rather than military

action.

Whether this diplomacy will give Moscow pause is unclear. It's even less clear that in today's Middle East, Iran and its regional proxies (never mind North Korea) will take notice. The IAEA general conference would be a risky place to propose another resolution condemning Iran—representatives from as many as 178 nations will be in attendance, and a fair number could view such a resolution as a case of a “non-aligned” state being picked on. Next week's Board of Governors meeting will probably wind up being a one-day post-conference formality, so the prospects for substantive action are slim there as well. And a Western military option against Iran seems like a nonstarter in the current political environment—though even that cannot be completely ruled out given the rapid evolution of Tehran's relationship with Russia and the escalating attacks being carried out by its proxies.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Senior Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Israel and the Coming Long War](#)

Sep 13, 2024



Assaf Orion

[\(/policy-analysis/israel-and-coming-long-war\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Netanyahu Is Playing Into Khamenei's Hands](#)

Sep 13, 2024



Dennis Ross

[\(/policy-analysis/netanyahu-playing-khameneis-hands\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Hamas Is Weakened, But a Prolonged Guerrilla Conflict Looms

Sep 12, 2024



Ido Levy

(/policy-analysis/hamas-weakened-prolonged-guerrilla-conflict-looms)

TOPICS

Great Power Competition (/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)