Israeli scientist talks Iran nuclear deal concerns

August 18, 2015 at 6:40 PM EDT

Ephraim Asculai spent more than four decades working as a scientist at the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, as well as five years at the IAEA. He joins Judy Woodruff from Israel to discuss why he argues that the Iran nuclear agreement is deeply flawed.

Transcript

Judy Woodruff: President Obama has lost two more potential Senate allies in his quest for support for the Iran nuclear deal, Republican Bob Corker and Democrat Robert Menendez.

Tonight, we continue our series of conversations about the agreement. Last week, we talked with a supporter, Gary Samore, who had just resigned from an advocacy group which opposed the deal.

Tonight, we turn to the viewpoint from Israel, where the majority of the population is against the agreement.

Joining me is Ephraim Asculai, who spent more than 40 years working as a scientist at the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, and five years for the IAEA in Vienna. He’s now a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

Ephraim Asculai, thank you very much for joining us.

You have argued that this is a deal that is deeply flawed. What’s the main problem with it, in your opinion?

Ephraim Asculai, Institute for National Security Studies: The issue is going to be the search for concealed facilities, the possible search for undeclared facilities, and these, as we know and we remember from the history of Iran, are very probable issues.

And looking for these sites, for these facilities will be a very, very difficult issue with the present agreement. The other issue is, let’s say that intelligence finds out about an undeclared concealed facility. What will the parties to the agreement do? Can they go and tell the IAEA? And this is written in the agreement. They tell the IAEA the exact source of their information. This is not always possible.

Judy Woodruff: What about the argument of the proponents, that whatever the Iranians did to cheat would involve a significant amount of nuclear material that, by
its very nature, would be indefinitely discoverable, that there’s — that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to hide radioactive nuclear material that they were working with?

**Ephraim Asculai:** Well, there are two answers to that.

The first one, that not all processes involve releases to the atmosphere or to the environment of nuclear radioactive material. Of course, reactors and processing plants are more prone to releases, but enrichment plants are less prone to that. But this is only one aspect.

The other aspect is development of the explosive mechanism, which doesn’t involve — many parts of it doesn’t involve radioactive material. And while doing that — and this is of course the INAUDIBLE issue and probably other sides — you cannot go and search for those. And even if facilities do emit radioactive materials, it is not always feasible for the inspectors to go there, because they’re not permitted to go and search for these facilities.

**Judy Woodruff:** Well, let me ask you about another aspect of this.

We know that in — just in the last few days, the Israeli Defense Forces have put out a strategic paper talking about the major threats facing the nation of Israel, a 33-page report that barely mentions Iran or its nuclear program.

**Ephraim Asculai:** Well, I don’t know. I think this is only the unclassified program that was published in the press.

I think that there’s a much longer document which is classified, and I think that Iran probably features there quite a lot.

**Judy Woodruff:** I also want to ask you about something that the New York Times columnist Tom Friedman wrote within the last week. He pointed out, he said, Israel has itself between 100 and 200 nuclear weapons. It has the ability to deliver them to Iran. And he said — and his point is that, knowing how outmatched it is, why in the world would Iran launch any kind of an attack on Israel, knowing what that would mean in return?

**Ephraim Asculai:** I want to ask why Iran is proclaiming that it wants to annihilate Israel.

I don’t think that Iran is afraid of Israel, if it denies the Holocaust, if it wants to destroy Israel. It probably is not vacantly saying. I think they really mean it. And if they mean it, Israel has to be prepared and take all precautions against it.

**Judy Woodruff:** What do you think the better alternative here is, Mr. Asculai? What other agreement do you think could be reached with Iran and the other five nations that would reach — that would achieve the kind of satisfactory arrangement that you think is necessary?
Ephraim Asculai: I think that the present agreement can be modified.

Okay, it’s going back to the drawing board, I know, I realize. And it probably is very difficult. But treaties have been modified over the years. Many treaties have been modified. And I think that if you modify this one, you could get a better result, perhaps not a perfect, but a much better result could be achieved.

Too many things were left out, too many things that were discussed during the last year or so within the international community, and they were left out. And that’s a pity.

Judy Woodruff: Ephraim Asculai, former official with the IAEA joining us tonight from Beersheba in Israel, thank you very much.

Ephraim Asculai: You’re most welcome.

Judy Woodruff: And we will have more viewpoints on the Iran agreement in the coming days and weeks. All of our Deal or No Deal interviews can be seen on our Web site.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/israeli-scientist-iran-nuclear-deal/