Iran's Nuclear Programme: No IAEA Inspection of Damaged Sites Until the War Ends Permanently



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Why in the News

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister **Kazem Gharibabadi** said in a televised interview late on 15 November 2026 that UN nuclear watchdog **IAEA inspectors will not be allowed into damaged nuclear facilities** until the **Middle East war ends permanently** and Iran's conditions are met. Days earlier, on **13 November**, a confidential IAEA report circulated to member states said Iran had refused talks on resuming inspections, citing the "persistent, explicit, and public threats" of military attacks by the US President. The agency expressed "growing concern" about a newly declared enrichment facility in **Isfahan**, whose location is unknown and which cannot be inspected.

The Latest Sequence

- **13 November:** The IAEA's confidential report (seen by AP) - Iran says monitoring discussions cannot proceed while it faces threats of attack. The agency said: "The Agency's lack of information about [Iran's] nuclear material and access to facilities to verify it is a matter of serious proliferation concern... and needs to be rectified with the utmost urgency."
- **15-16 November:** Gharibabadi said inspections will be allowed only once Iran's conditions are met and the war has permanently ended; he described the agency's request as "likely aimed at assessing the effectiveness of American weaponry". Iran's demands include **unfreezing its seized assets and lifting sanctions**; talks on the nuclear programme will come "at a later stage".
- **Earlier in November:** the US military announced a **$20 million reward** for information on Iran's nuclear programme; Tehran called it "repugnant".

Background: June 2025 to Now

- **12 June 2025:** Iran declared a new uranium enrichment facility (IFEP) in Isfahan to the IAEA - the same day an IAEA resolution declared Iran in breach of its safeguards obligations; the next day Israel began strikes on Iranian nuclear sites, with the US joining later that month (the 12-day war).

- **Pre-strike stockpile:** Iran had accumulated an estimated **441 kg of uranium enriched to 60%** - close to weapons grade; the 2015 deal (JCPOA) capped the stockpile at **300 kg of UF6 enriched up to 3.67%, or its equivalent in other chemical forms (202.8 kg uranium mass)**, both of which Iran had already exceeded.
- **Isfahan complex:** above-ground structures heavily damaged in the strikes; the state of underground facilities is unclear. The IAEA believes most of Iran's highly enriched uranium was stored there.
- **28 February 2026:** the Middle East war broke out; US-Israeli strikes killed Iran's supreme leader **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**; Iran blockaded the Strait of Hormuz.
- **September 2026:** IAEA inspectors were able to visit the **Bushehr** nuclear power plant, but gained no access to other bombed sites including Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan. A year earlier too, the agency had said it inspected only some of the 13 "unaffected" facilities and none of the seven affected ones.

The Legal Framework: NPT and Safeguards

Iran is a signatory to the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, under which non-weapon members must place their nuclear programmes under IAEA safeguards (monitoring and verification). The 2015 JCPOA (with the P5+1) was a political agreement on top of that - it set enrichment caps, stockpile limits and intrusive inspections. The arrangement unravelled after the US left in 2018. Iran says its programme is for peaceful civilian purposes; the US and Israel say the strikes were to prevent nuclear weapons - something Iran has consistently denied seeking.

Significance for India and the Exam

- **Capacity of the non-proliferation regime:** an NPT member denying the IAEA access to its sites challenges the most basic condition of a verification-based international order.
- **Impact on India:** the Hormuz blockade pressures energy supplies and prices; regional instability also affects diaspora safety and remittances.
- **Balance:** India has consistently supported dialogue and an IAEA-centred solution - this situation offers the classic exam theme of "power politics versus institutional verification".

Prelims Practice Questions

Q1: Under the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), what limits were set for Iran?
1. Stockpile capped at 300 kg of UF6 enriched up to 3.67%, or its equivalent in other chemical forms (202.8 kg uranium mass).
2. Enrichment purity capped at 3.67%.
3. IAEA inspections limited to the Bushehr plant only.

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (a) The JCPOA capped the stockpile at 300 kg of UF6 enriched up to 3.67%, or its equivalent in other chemical forms (202.8 kg uranium mass); inspections were not limited to one plant - it was a broad verification regime.

Q2: In November 2026, at which sites has Iran blocked IAEA inspections?

(a) Bushehr only

(b) Damaged sites including Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan

(c) Tehran research reactor only

(d) All nuclear sites including Bushehr

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (b) Inspectors were able to visit Bushehr in September 2026; other strike-damaged sites including Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan remain inaccessible.

Mains Practice Question

Question: "The IAEA inspection deadlock over Iran is the gravest test yet of the verification-based framework of the nuclear non-proliferation regime." Comment. Also suggest possible diplomatic paths out of this situation. (250 words)

Outline: Introduction - the role of the NPT/safeguards; facts - 441 kg/60%, Isfahan's unknown facility, the conditions behind the inspection block; analysis - trust-building impossible without verification; the security-versus-access dilemma; paths - phased inspection resumption, sanctions-relief-linked talks, regional dialogue; India's priorities - energy security and a rules-based order; conclusion.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Short answer: Iran has said IAEA inspectors cannot enter damaged nuclear sites - Natanz, Fordow, Isfahan - until the war ends permanently and its conditions (asset unfreezing, sanctions relief) are met; the agency calls this a serious proliferation concern.

Q: Why is the IAEA so concerned about Isfahan?

Iran declared a new enrichment facility (IFEP) there on 12 June 2025; the agency knows neither its exact location nor whether it holds nuclear material. Most of Iran's 60%-enriched uranium (~441 kg in total) was believed stored at this complex before the June 2025 strikes.

Q: What are Iran's conditions?

Per Deputy Foreign Minister Gharibabadi: a permanent end to the war, unfreezing of seized assets, and lifting of sanctions. Talks on the nuclear programme would come "at a later stage".

Q: What were the main limits of the 2015 deal?

Under the JCPOA, Iran's stockpile was capped at 300 kg of UF6 enriched up to 3.67%, or its equivalent in other chemical forms (202.8 kg uranium mass); Iran had already crossed both - by the June 2025 strikes it held an estimated 441 kg at 60%.

Sources

- AP (13 November 2026): IAEA's confidential report - Iran cites threats to refuse inspections
- BBC (13 November 2026): Agency's "growing concern" over the Isfahan facility; 441 kg/60% figures
- AFP/Straits Times (16 November 2026): Gharibabadi's statement - no inspections until the war ends
- IAEA (official body) - note: the relevant report is confidential and restricted to member states; facts here are based on news agencies' published extracts