

Iran Proposes to Produce Nuclear Fuel With Russia

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TEHRAN, Iran — Iran has submitted a proposal to Russia to jointly assemble the nuclear fuel for the country's new power reactor and any future facilities, state media reported Thursday.

The move appeared to be an attempt by Tehran to gain some control over the nuclear fuel process at its Russian-built Bushehr nuclear plant. With Moscow's help, Iran began loading uranium fuel into the facility on Saturday.

The United States and allies lifted their opposition to the Bushehr plant after Russia pledged to handle all the nuclear fuel to make that sure no material is shifted to a possible Iranian weapons program in the future. The latest proposal by Iran to have even a sideline role in the nuclear fuel process could stir backlash in the West.

"We have made a proposal to Russia to create a consortium under Russian license to do part of the work in Russia and part in Iran," the head of Iran's atomic energy agency, Ali Akbar Salehi, was quoted as saying by state-run Press TV. "We should show the world our capability in uranium production and its conversion into nuclear fuel."

Salehi, who is also Iran's vice president, said Moscow is "studying the proposal."

A Rosatom official said the two countries have discussed the possibility of creating a facility to assemble the fuel rods for Bushehr. The facility would operate under Russian license on Iranian territory.

But the official said the uranium enrichment would be performed on Russian soil. Speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, the official added that Russia first would focus on commissioning the Bushehr plant, and then turn its attention to Iran's new proposal.

Russia is currently supplying all the uranium fuel for Bushehr. That fuel is enriched to 3.5 percent, well below the 90 percent enrichment needed for a nuclear warhead.

Bushehr is not considered a proliferation risk because the Iranians have agreed to allow Moscow to retrieve all the used reactor fuel for reprocessing. Spent fuel contains plutonium, which can be used to make atomic weapons.

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