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An Appeal to Iran

by David Albright and Christina Walrond

President Hassan Rouhani in an important [NBC Nightly News interview](#) September 18, 2013 stated: “We have never pursued or sought a nuclear bomb. We are not going to do so. We are solely seeking peaceful nuclear technology.” Unfortunately, the available evidence provides little reason to believe him. If President Rouhani wants the world to believe Iran will not build nuclear weapons in the future, the Iranian government should reconsider its blanket denials of ever seeking nuclear weapons in the past.

The U.S. intelligence community in a [2007 National Intelligence Estimate](#) stated: “We assess with high confidence that until fall 2003, Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons.” It added: “We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.”

Our European allies, Britain, France, and Germany, agreed that Iran had a sizeable nuclear weapons program into 2003. However, they differed with the NIE’s post-2003 conclusion. They assessed that Iran’s nuclear weaponization program continued after 2003, albeit in a smaller and less structured manner.

A March 31, 2012 *New York Times* [story](#) by James Risen reported that the 2010 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) assessed that “while Iran had conducted some basic weapons-related research, it was not believed to have restarted the actual weapons program halted in 2003.” In an earlier article on March 17, 2012, Risen wrote: “Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful civilian purposes, but American intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency have picked up evidence in recent years that some Iranian research activities that may be weapons-related have continued since 2003, officials said. That information has not been significant enough for the spy agencies to alter their view that the weapons program has not been restarted.” But Risen reported that U.S. intelligence may have found evidence that research on nuclear weapons may have continued after 2003.

These assessments are in-line with the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA’s) findings. In its November 2011 safeguards report, the IAEA provided evidence of Iran’s pre- and post-2003 nuclear weaponization efforts. The IAEA [found](#), “The information indicates that prior to the end of 2003 [the activities] took place under a structured programme. There are also indications that some activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device continued after 2003, and that some may still be ongoing.” Several years of efforts by the IAEA to resolve these concerns have proven fruitless. The IAEA is scheduled to meet Iran on September 27 to discuss these issues again.

Thus, these intelligence and IAEA assessments differ markedly with President Rouhani's blanket denial about seeking nuclear weapons. Moreover, they share a view that Iran may have continued researching nuclear weapons in more recent times.

These intelligence agencies also share an assessment that Iran has not made a decision to build nuclear weapons. So, President Rouhani's pledge that Iran will not build nuclear weapons can still become reality. And his apparent willingness to seek meaningful negotiations offers the first hope in several years that an agreement solving this nuclear crisis is possible. However, if Iran is unwilling to come clean about its past efforts to build nuclear weapons, or at the very least acknowledge the existence of a program, it undermines the credibility of statements about its present-day nuclear intentions.

The simple reality is that governments deceive about their nuclear efforts. Brazil, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Israel and South Africa all lied about their nuclear weapons efforts. However, the countries that did not intend to continue pursuing nuclear weapons found that they reentered the fold of the international community only after offering transparency measures about their past programs in order to build confidence in their future actions.

If Iran truly does not intend to pursue nuclear weapons in the future, it should heed the experience of states that abandoned nuclear weapons. Brazil and South Africa came clean about their past nuclear weapons efforts as part of their successful process to convince the international community that they had turned their back on nuclear weapons and would not seek them in the future. Brazil came clean at the start of its renunciations of all nuclear explosives. South Africa mistakenly chose the path of trying to deny that it ever had nuclear weapons as it limited its nuclear programs to civil activities and greatly increased transparency over its remaining nuclear programs. But South Africa's approach did not work; too many governments knew that it had had a nuclear weapons program and wondered if the deception meant that it was hiding on-going nuclear weapons efforts. The IAEA, which was intensely investigating South Africa's nuclear activities, shared this skepticism. South Africa's deception was poisoning the well.

So, in March 1993, President F.W. de Klerk announced to the world that indeed South Africa did have nuclear weapons but had destroyed them several years earlier. He invited the IAEA to verify his statements. The IAEA did so in a half year because of South Africa's remarkable cooperation with the inspectors. South Africa's pledge that it would never seek nuclear weapons again suddenly became much more credible. These transparency measures quickly convinced the world of South Africa's sincerity.

Iran may fear that it will be treated differently. The Iranian government may reason that if it comes clean, it will be punished by the international community. But other cases argue against such a response. The key is coming clean as is part of a process of strategic limitations on its nuclear programs, far greater transparency, and frankness about its past. Then, the IAEA and governments can develop confidence that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons. But if Iran seeks to continue to hide its past military nuclear efforts, it may find that no amount of limitations and transparency on its current programs is enough to reassure the international community. Significant questions about its motives would likely remain, and thus it will be unlikely to gain the major relief from sanctions it so desperately seeks.