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U.S. Intelligence Estimates and the Iranian Nuclear Program

By David Albright and Paul Brannan

Recent media reporting about the U.S. intelligence findings on Iran's nuclear weaponization program has focused on the relatively narrow technical question of whether the Iranian regime has made the decision to restart an effort to actually build nuclear weapons. The recent reporting shows that the U.S. intelligence community assesses that this decision on restart has not yet been made. However, this reporting does not address the broader question of whether Iran decided many years ago to seek nuclear weapons and put in place specific nuclear capabilities to allow it to do so expeditiously. As a result, the NIE conclusion about restart, as reported publicly, may provide false comfort about the status of Iran's nuclear effort and the likelihood of Iran building nuclear weapons.

When or if Iran will actually decide to breakout and make nuclear weapons depends on a range of political and technical factors. At the upcoming negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, the priority should be achieving both a set of interim measures that reduce the chance of Iran breaking out and the outlines of a long-term agreement that can establish confidently that Iran will not pursue nuclear weapons. For a more thorough discussion of breakout scenarios, timelines for Iran making nuclear weapons, strategies to delay Iran's nuclear progress, and negotiated approaches, the reader is referred to ISIS's [Preventing Iran from Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Its Future Nuclear Options](#). See also the recent Council on Foreign Relations's Expert Roundup: [Iran Talks: What Should Be on the Table?](#)

Nuclear Weapons Dimensions

During the last year, ISIS staff have discussed with a set of U.S. and foreign government officials and reviewed open sources regarding intelligence assessments about Iran's nuclear weapons program. ISIS found broad consensus in assessing the lack of any Iranian decision to build nuclear weapons or restart a structured nuclear weaponization program, which is a collection of activities and efforts aimed at developing and building the nuclear weapon itself. (The production of nuclear explosive material is considered a separate and more difficult activity.) Few doubted the existence of a structured weaponization program in the past, despite the lack of uniformity of assessments on the scale of this effort. There was also broad agreement that Iran has been putting in place the technical infrastructure that could produce the necessary nuclear explosive material quickly. It may also be furthering its nuclear weaponization capabilities.

ISIS also found considerable support, although not unanimity, that the regime made a strategic decision many years ago to obtain nuclear weapons. There was little support for the view that Iran's goal of acquiring nuclear weapons ended in 2003, when Iran suddenly ended or cut back drastically its nuclear weaponization program and suspended its uranium enrichment program.

Recent *New York Times* Reporting on Restart

The New York Times recently reported that U.S. intelligence agencies assess in the most recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that Iran had a nuclear weapons development effort prior to 2004 and some level of work may have continued after 2003. However, there has not been enough work to rise to the past level of effort or sufficient to assess with confidence that Iran had made a decision to build nuclear weapons.

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."

These reports are in-line with the IAEA's findings. In its November 2011 safeguards report, the IAEA provided evidence of Iran's pre- and post-2003 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."

The 2010 NIE reportedly [takes a more holistic view](#) of the entire Iranian nuclear program than the 2007 NIE did. It does not separate the weaponization issue from Iran's uranium enrichment progress and capabilities.

The *Times* also reports that the writers of the 2010 NIE did not face political pressure to reach certain conclusions about the status of the Iranian nuclear program. Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund told Risen: "The intelligence was so heavily politicized on Iraq. The higher up the chain in the government the intelligence reporting went, the more it got massaged, and the doubts and caveats got removed." But now, he said, "I haven't heard any complaints about the administration pressuring the intelligence community to tilt the intelligence."

Nuclear Weapons Capability

The NIE's assessment on the issue of restart is an important finding. But it does not really address the question of whether Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and putting in place the capability to do so quickly. If Iran is working to alleviate bottlenecks in its nuclear weaponization effort in a more decentralized manner, it would not constitute a restart, according to the reported analytical framework used in the NIE but nonetheless would be a very troubling development that has serious policy implications.

Moreover, German intelligence detected Iranian procurements in the mid-2000s related to furthering Iran's nuclear weaponization capabilities, leading Germany to assess that the nuclear weaponization effort was likely ongoing. It did not assess that a decision had been reached to build nuclear weapons or to restart a structured, pre-2004 level nuclear weaponization program. Nonetheless, it assessed that Iran was likely continuing to expand its ability to build nuclear weapons. In essence, Germany used a different framework than the United States to judge whether the Iranian weaponization program existed in the mid-2000s. Britain and France also judged that Iran had either continued or restarted nuclear weaponization activities or more broadly its efforts to build nuclear weapons.

The focus on the question of restart risks missing an important dimension to the debate about an Iranian nuclear weapons program. Iran's reported decision to halt the organized weaponization program but maintain the in-house capability and know-how to weaponize within various centers and universities permits a latent, dispersed weaponization capability that could be called up if the regime decided to construct nuclear weapons. In the meantime, Iran could continue to improve, expand, and diversify its fissile material production capabilities within the confines of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Therefore, the NIE conclusion about restart, as reported publicly, provides only a partial picture of the effective status of Iran's nuclear program. While Iran's current nuclear program lacks the degree of focused coordination and organization among its former weaponization-oriented elements, in reality, Iran's capability to weaponize highly enriched uranium (HEU) could be reconfigured on short order following a decision to breakout and produce the requisite HEU. It is this production of HEU quickly that is the fundamental bottleneck in any Iranian effort to build nuclear weapons.

The development of effective policy measures to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons while avoiding military options depends on a realistic view of Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities. Otherwise, one risks overvaluing elements in Iran's program that will not have a significant impact on its decision to make nuclear weapons and undervaluing the ones that will. In the future, U.S. intelligence agencies may face increasing difficulty in deciding whether Iran has restarted a structured nuclear weaponization program. Moreover, a focus on such a restart may not accurately reveal the likelihood or timeline for when Iran would decide to make nuclear weapons. Other elements of Iran's nuclear program, such as its expanding enrichment activities, growing stockpiles of enriched uranium, and its capabilities to build centrifuge plants outside of IAEA safeguards, deserve far greater attention as indicators of an ultimate decision to build nuclear weapons. These activities are also far easier to monitor and assess.

Conclusion

The recent media reporting supports those who assess that Iran had a military nuclear weaponization program prior to 2004 and that some parts of this program may continue. Many assess that Iran made a strategic decision to obtain nuclear weapons years ago. Few doubt that Iran may breakout and build nuclear weapons.

For negotiations to work, Iran needs to answer the many outstanding IAEA questions about the military dimensions of its nuclear program and establish confidence among the international community that it will not pursue nuclear weapons.