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## Steering Iran Away from Building Nuclear Weapons

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Without past negotiated outcomes, international pressure, sanctions, and intelligence operations, Iran would likely have nuclear weapons by now. Iran has proven vulnerable to international pressure. It now faces several inhibitions against building nuclear weapons, not least of which is fear of a military strike by Israel and perhaps others if it breaks out by egregiously violating its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and moves to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons.

-- *Preventing Iran from Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Future Nuclear Options*, ISIS Report to the United States Institute of Peace, March 5, 2012

The content of this statement was challenged in a recent report, [Weighing the Benefits and Costs of International Sanctions against Iran](#),<sup>1</sup> released in September 2012 by The Iran Project. In the words of the authors, William Luers, Iris Bieri, and Priscilla Lewis: "Some have even argued that without sanctions and other pressures, Iran would already have a nuclear weapon. We disagree with this judgment, however, since U.S. intelligence officials have stated with a high degree of confidence that the decision to build a nuclear weapon has not yet been taken by Iran's Supreme Leader." While ISIS welcomes comments about its findings and analysis, we find that the authors have mischaracterized our statement and publicly available information about U.S. intelligence findings. The report also appears to downplay a significant international accomplishment in preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons.

ISIS's assessment summarized in the quote above is not a categorical statement that without international pressure, negotiated outcomes, sanctions, and other measures Iran would definitely have a nuclear weapon, only that it *likely* would. In addition, the actions that have deterred Iran from building nuclear weapons in the 2000s involved fear of a military strike in the period up to and after the 2003 Gulf War, a series of highly embarrassing discoveries of secret, undeclared nuclear activities and facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the negotiating skill of the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Germany in late 2003 to achieve a suspension to Iran's sensitive nuclear programs.

In supporting their criticism of the statement in the ISIS report, the authors reference a March 2011 statement by Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper before Congress expressing a high level of confidence that the Iranian regime had not decided to build nuclear weapons. This is a widely shared assessment by most Western intelligence agencies. However, this statement provides more support for ISIS's statement than evidence against it.

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<sup>1</sup> The report itself appears to be undated.

One important source of U.S. intelligence assessments is the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The unclassified NIE states:

We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program<sup>2</sup>; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. We judge with high confidence that the halt, and Tehran's announcement of its decision to suspend its declared uranium enrichment program and sign an Additional Protocol to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement, was directed primarily *in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work*. (emphasis added)

The NIE states that “international scrutiny and pressure” were instrumental in Iran’s decision to halt its nuclear weapons program, which the NIE judges with high confidence existed in the fall of 2003. Although most Western intelligence agencies agree that the Iranian regime has not decided to build nuclear weapons since then, most would recognize that continued pressure, including that resulting from sanctions and the threat of military strikes, plays an important role in constraining the regime from making that decision today. That assessment is consistent with the Obama administration’s stated policy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Without such actions in 2003 and additional actions prior to and after 2003, there are many reasons to believe that Iran would have built nuclear weapons by now. Other countries faced with little effective international pressure, such as South Africa in the late 1970s, Pakistan in the early to mid-1980s, and North Korea in the early 2000s, did build nuclear weapons. In 2003, there were strong proponents within Iran for building nuclear weapons. Moreover, in 2003, Iran’s “structured” nuclear weapons program was making progress on building a warhead deliverable by the Shahab 3 ballistic missile, according to the November 2011 IAEA Iran safeguards report.<sup>3</sup> Based on information from European intelligence officials, critical evidence that a determined nuclear weapons program had indeed been halted was intelligence showing the program leader protested the decision to cut back or halt the program. Moreover, in 2002, Iran was building and operating several secret gas centrifuge facilities; even today the full extent of its past and, for that matter, current centrifuge program is not known. Although Iran maintained that it intended at some point to declare all of its secret enrichment facilities, it also may have in fact intended to keep key facilities secret. The Western discovery several years later of the secret construction of the deeply buried Fordow gas centrifuge site further supports that view. Iran was on a trajectory to produce enriched uranium in secret and complete a nuclear warhead. Assessing that Iran would likely have decided to build nuclear weapons absent international discovery and actions in 2003 and afterwards is both logical and defensible.

One could argue that in the absence of all these actions, Iran would not have built nuclear weapons, but this point seems particularly difficult to justify. One could at best argue is that it is not known what Iran may have done if the pressure had not existed. That would be a fair point. In reconsidering our assessment, we could agree with the finding that we cannot know with certainty what Iran would have done with regard to building nuclear weapons. However, ISIS still assesses that absent the long list of actions taken to deter Iran, it would have likely acquired nuclear weapons by today.

Why does this debate matter? It is important to point out that a collection of actions in the early 2000s, sometimes taken with little international coordination, managed to keep Iran from building nuclear weapons. These actions led to sharp cutbacks in Iran’s declared and undeclared nuclear programs and worked

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote 1 in the NIE: For the purposes of this Estimate, by "nuclear weapons program" we mean Iran's nuclear weapon design and weaponization work and covert uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related work; we do not mean Iran's declared civil work related to uranium conversion and enrichment.

<sup>3</sup> IAEA Director General, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of the National Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2011/65, November 8, 2011.

surprisingly well. It took the U.S. intelligence community several years, until the preparation of the 2007 NIE, to realize and acknowledge these methods' full effect in stopping Iran's structured nuclear weapons program in 2003. A key lesson is that the Iranian regime was not fully committed to building nuclear weapons and it was vulnerable to influence about its future decisions with regard to its nuclear program.

Can such efforts work again? So far, they appear to contribute importantly to preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons, although the IAEA and European intelligence agencies have stated that some work on nuclear weaponization may continue. When several Western intelligence agencies assess that the Iranian regime has not yet made a decision to build nuclear weapons, this assessment likely reflects Iran's hesitation to do so out of concern of the consequences.

The future is more difficult to predict, particularly as Iran continues defying the IAEA and seeks to expand its nuclear weapons capabilities. Today, compared to the early 2000s, there is more emphasis on ramped up and more effective sanctions aimed at pressuring the Iranian regime to change its nuclear positions, sanctions that interfere in Iran's ability to procure from overseas the equipment it needs to expand and update its centrifuge and other sensitive nuclear programs, intelligence operations that better detect and disrupt Iran's centrifuge program, and an overt U.S. policy of preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons. The continuing use of these methods, albeit in a different configuration than in 2003 and 2004, is the best way to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons today and in the future and avoiding war.