



March 21, 2012

The New National Intelligence Estimate on Iran: A Step in the Right Direction

David Albright and Paul Brannan

ISIS has learned in researching and discussing the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran that important differences exist from the 2007 NIE on Iran's capability to make a nuclear weapon. The 2007 declassified NIE specifically noted that it did not take into account Iran's "declared civil work related to uranium conversion and enrichment" when assessing the status of its nuclear weapons program. The new NIE does not distinguish between declared and undeclared enrichment activities when considering Iran's nuclear weapons capability. In doing so, the new NIE more accurately values the impact that Iran's advancements in its gas centrifuge uranium enrichment program, declared or otherwise, have on its capability to decide to make highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. This acknowledges that Iran's capability to make highly enriched uranium, as represented by the declared elements of its uranium enrichment program, influences any political decision to make nuclear weapons.

The new NIE includes that Iran could be furthering its development of components for nuclear weapons while reportedly assessing that not enough activity has occurred on weaponization to justify a determination that Iran has made a decision to restart its nuclear weaponization program or build a bomb.¹ Both NIEs judge that Iran had a nuclear weaponization program prior to 2004. Missing in ISIS's information about the new NIE is the confidence level that the intelligence community has in its ability to detect a restart and the level of detected activity necessary to determine that a restart has occurred. The 2007 NIE judged with moderate confidence that restart had not happened as of mid-2007. It should be noted that this assessment about restart was rejected by key European allies and Israel, which all assessed that Iran was likely continuing to develop its nuclear weaponization capabilities and that its nuclear weapons program likely existed after 2003.

Weaknesses in 2007 NIE

A key weakness of the 2007 NIE was that it did not appropriately emphasize the significance of the status and growth of Iran's enrichment program in general as it related to Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon. Rather, the 2007 NIE recognized that declared enrichment activities represented a technical capability that "could be applied to producing nuclear weapons," but instead highlighted the evidence of the cessation of specific weaponization work by Iran in 2003 and its judgment that a weaponization program had not restarted as of mid-2007.

¹ James Risen, "U.S. Faces a Tricky Task in Assessment of Data on Iran," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2012: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/world/middleeast/iran-intelligence-crisis-showed-difficulty-of-assessing-nuclear-data.html?scp=8&sq=iran%20nuclear&st=cse>

Another weakness of the 2007 NIE was that it cited the cessation of certain weaponization work in Iran as evidence of a halt to a nuclear weapons program. Recent events involving Iran's nuclear program raise questions about how to define a nuclear weapons program. Construction of the Fordow enrichment facility, for example, began as early as 2006 and continued through September 2009, when it was revealed in an announcement by Presidents Barack Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister Gordon Brown. There is a strong possibility that the Fordow facility was originally designed to be an enrichment facility for the production of highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons—separate from the Natanz enrichment facility. A facility with a military nuclear purpose under construction by at least 2006 could suggest that some elements of Iran's military nuclear effort that the 2007 NIE states were in existence in the 1990s may have continued beyond 2003 in a different capacity.

In addition, gathering evidence of “restart” is very difficult, and its evaluation can be very subjective. A smoking gun would certainly be concrete evidence that Iran is working on enough specific components of nuclear weapons to reach the nebulous definition of a “restart”. A firm conclusion on whether a “restart” has occurred, however, may not be possible, given that Iran would be expected over time to increase its precautions against leakage of any information about secret nuclear weaponization work.

Most of this discussion occurs on a highly classified level, and the Iraq experience teaches that such information and assessments can be manipulated by policy makers and selectively leaked for political gain. Because of that, it is critical to support the IAEA's effort to fully understand and verify allegations of Iran's past and possibly on-going nuclear weaponization work.

Sounder Approaches

A sounder approach, which we assume is part of the new NIE assessment, is to render judgments about whether the Iranian leadership has decided to build a nuclear weapon by looking for concrete evidence of such a decision and basing policy on this. Emphasizing the old approach of whether Iran's nuclear weaponization program has restarted appears more aimed at defending the poor methodologies popularized in the declassified 2007 NIE. This approach also ignores that Iran is judged by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (and stated in internal IAEA documents²) to have likely accumulated enough knowledge prior to 2004 to be able to construct a crude nuclear explosive device, suitable for underground testing and simple delivery systems. This capability would mean that the time is relatively short between when a nuclear weaponization program would take possession of enough weapon-grade uranium for a device and when a crude device could be assembled—on order of six months or less.

More easily measurable criteria of a decision to make nuclear weapons taking into consideration these factors include whether the Supreme Leader and his advisors have established a decision making structure on building nuclear weapons, or whether the regime has taken concrete steps, such as throwing out the IAEA inspectors, diverting enriched uranium from safeguards, or operating undeclared fuel cycle facilities including a covert enrichment plant. For now, Iran will need at least several months to accumulate enough weapon-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon, if it decides to break out. The production of weapon-grade uranium is much more detectable than a restart of an Iranian nuclear weaponization effort, much of which has been accomplished already. ISIS examined various processes by which Iran could make highly enriched uranium for use in nuclear weapons³. Most of these processes require actions by Iran that would be detectable.

² Excerpts from Internal IAEA Document on Alleged Iranian Nuclear Weaponization, Institute for Science and International Security, October 2, 2009: http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_info_3October2009.pdf

³ David Albright, Paul Brannan, Andrea Stricker, Christina Walrond and Houston Wood, Preventing Iran from Getting Nuclear Weapons: Constraining Its Future Nuclear Options, The Institute for Science and International Security, March 5, 2012: http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/USIP_Template_5March2012-1.pdf

Several years from now, as Iran's nuclear capabilities develop and if Iran continues to degrade the level of transparency over its program, it may be difficult to know if Iran has crossed the threshold and acquired nuclear weapons. But for now, such a decision will have measurable consequences and allow time for an international response.