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Reality Check: Shorter and Shorter Timeframe if Iran Decides to Make Nuclear Weapons

Rev.1

David Albright, Paul Brannan, Andrea Stricker and Andrew Ortendahl

In the discussion regarding the nature of the Iranian nuclear program, some have sought to downplay Iran's nuclear progress by emphasizing that Iran has not yet "made the decision to build a nuclear weapon." While it is true and important that there are no indications that Iran has made a decision to actually construct a nuclear weapon, such a statement does not accurately portray the real concern about Iran's nuclear program and progress. In fact, Iran has already made a series of important decisions that would give it the ability to quickly make nuclear weapons. In doing so, it has pursued a strategy of nuclear hedging: it has put together a gas centrifuge program to provide the necessary fuel for a weapon, worked on developing a nuclear weaponization capability, and developed a medium-range ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, all under ostensibly civilian purposes or great secrecy. The international community should not take ease in the absence of this final decision since Iran has already overcome many obstacles on the path to finally acquiring nuclear weapons. Whether or not Iran will ultimately build nuclear weapons depends greatly on what is done now. Given Iran's steady, albeit slow progress, downplaying the threat can end up serving to undermine the development of non-military methods to keep Iran from building nuclear weapons.

Iran's strategy of "nuclear hedging," or developing the capability to rapidly build nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian nuclear program, is laid out in the evidence of work on nuclear weaponization, particularly efforts to make specific nuclear components, contained in the November 2011 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards report on Iran¹. The intent of such hedging is very different than the latent nuclear weapons capabilities possessed by states such as Japan or Germany and is inimical to the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).² If Iran's ability to quickly build nuclear weapons increases during the next few years, this will only shorten the period of time between taking a decision to build a bomb and constructing one.

The lengths Iran has gone to both conceal major elements of its enrichment program, such as the originally undeclared Natanz, Kalaye Electric, and Fordow enrichment facilities, and establish controversial capabilities, such as its 19.75 percent low enriched uranium (LEU) production program, have raised concerns that its hedging strategy may be aimed at eventual highly enriched uranium production. The discovery of the Fordow enrichment facility compounded concerns that Iran originally intended for this facility to make highly enriched uranium at some point or preserve a capability to do so. Since 2010, when Iran began enriching to higher levels, it has already made enough 19.75 percent LEU to fuel the Tehran Research Reactor for many years. Iran's stockpiling of this material may be another component of its hedging strategy which is aimed at keeping adequate fuel on standby for a quicker breakout to nuclear weapons.

¹ Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and the relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report by the Director General, International Atomic Energy Agency, November 8, 2011:

http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf

² John Carlson, "Iran Nuclear Issue—Considerations for a Negotiated Outcome" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Science and International Security, November 4, 2011. Available

at: http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Carlson_Iran_deal_4November2011.pdf

There is still time for the international community to find a peaceful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue. As Iran's timeline to nuclear weapons decreases, however, there is an inversely increased urgency to find this resolution. It is unwise to measure this level of urgency by relying on the fact that there remains no evidence that Iran has taken the last step to actually construct a nuclear explosive device. Eschewing strengthened non-military options in the form of pressure and sanctions ignores this shortening timeline and makes it more likely that Iran will progress in its hedging strategy, augmenting the chance for armed conflict.