



We need a new discussion about Iran's nuclear weapons work

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U.S. intelligence is shielding the Biden-Harris administration from having to take serious action on Iran's nuclear program. For years, they [clamored](#) repeatedly that Iran was not "currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that would be necessary to produce a testable nuclear device." [Now](#), it has shifted slightly to Iran has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so." While hinting at nuclear weapon activities taking place, it is focusing on public Iranian statements and old news on Iran's capabilities to produce weapon-grade uranium, while continuing to avoid any type of public discussion on what nuclear weaponization activities Iran may be undertaking and how long it would take Iran to produce a testable nuclear device if it started today.

Likely, because some uncomfortable truths would come out: Iran can do it way too quickly, and initial activities to build the bomb could be difficult to detect and could predate any effort to enrich up to weapon-grade at its enrichment plants.

Moving on from its mantra, which ties back to the unclassified 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate ([NIE](#)), widely misinterpreted as Iran ending its nuclear weapons program in 2004 altogether, would require the intelligence community to take a hard look at that NIE, its definition of nuclear weapons programs, and see where Iran fits with its nuclear weapons preparatory, or "on-demand," program, a scenario not considered in the NIE.

While briefly uncomfortable, this discussion is desperately needed. It is time for U.S. officials to face the Iran nuclear situation as it is.

The U.S. intelligence community was largely able to avoid this discussion for years, because Iran was many months away from having enough weapon grade uranium (WGU) for a nuclear weapon, and likely would have needed to keep international inspectors out of multiple facilities to make it, providing ample time and opportunity for detection, international discussion, and reaction.

This has changed over the last two years, but dramatically in the last several weeks: Iran can now ironically break out [quickly](#), in days, using only its deeply buried Fordow facility. Ironically, because this facility, called originally the Al Ghadir project, was built to make weapon-grade

uranium as a key part of Iran's Amad Plan, its crash nuclear weapons program in the early 2000s, and Iran continued to build this facility in secret for years. The facility was not known to the intelligence community in the run up to the 2007 NIE, a fact often ignored in judging the mistakes in the unclassified NIE, and never addressed in follow-up unclassified reports to dissect what its existence meant for an Iranian weapons program.

Today, with only days for Iran to produce enough weapon-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon, we cannot rely on breakout as the main indicator that Iran is rushing to the bomb.

If the U.S. is serious about its goal to stop Iran from having a nuclear weapon, detecting nuclear weaponization activities is increasingly significant as a trigger to act. But the current U.S. unclassified intelligence assessments are so limited that it seems like the U.S. assessment is unmindful of the current risk.

The gap in open discussion leaves the flawed 2007 NIE as the last word, although we have learned so much since. The on/off nature of that assessment misses Iran's gradual whittling down of the time needed to make a bomb and the steps needed to make one; an effort that should be seen as a program, albeit different from one actively building a weapon. The NIE took a far too narrow definition of a nuclear weapons program, as only weaponization and covert nuclear plants. Yet, even in its own narrow definition, it never followed up after missing the latter in the guise of what we now know as Fordow.

Thanks to the [Nuclear Archive](#) we have a good understanding of Iran's nuclear weaponization capabilities until 2004 and its plans to continue afterwards with a smaller, more disguised nuclear weapons program. We have learned that detecting nuclear weaponization activities is notoriously difficult, with not only Fordow, but with about [half](#) of the Amad sites remaining undetected by Western intelligence, revealed only by Iran's own documentation, neatly kept and organized, until abducted by Israel in 2018.

Thanks to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), assisted by member states, we have a passing understanding of Iran's post-2003 activities until about 2009 and more recently a careful record of Iran's falsehoods about its undeclared nuclear materials and activities. We also now know that Iran's main bottleneck in 2003 was WGU production, a bottleneck all but gone today, so thoroughly that it would even surprise Amad's head Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, if he were still alive.

The archive and IAEA findings also highlight that Iran can make a crude nuclear weapon far faster than commonly assessed; earlier Institute [assessments](#) concluded that Iran could do so in six months. It could be shorter today.

Thus, today, when media [reports](#) come out that Iran may be conducting weaponization relevant work, and reportedly making some [progress](#), it needs to be placed in context of Iran's past and present nuclear weapons capabilities. Especially, we cannot go and ask Iran about it, as Axios

has [reported](#) the United States did on some computer modeling efforts, an action which makes U.S. officials look like they have been living under a rock.

To be able to put potentially weaponization related activities and new breakout capabilities in context and adequately assess the threat, we cannot leave the 2007 NIE assessment as the last word. We need a new, honest public discussion on Iran's nuclear weapons capabilities and the technical and diplomatic structure Tehran has put in place that would allow it to quickly build nuclear weapons while the United States is paralyzed in its attempts to avoid a crisis.

We need it so the U.S. administration can start acting accordingly. The discussions between U.S. and Israeli intelligence on potentially weaponization related activities being conducted in Iran have to take place. They cannot become [casualties](#) of other events, be delayed, or undermined by secret U.S.-Iran correspondence.

So when Iran comes to the negotiation table, it knows the U.S. officials have their eyes wide open; their eyes on the prize: An end to Iran's nuclear weapons program as it stands, verified by the IAEA.

And if Iran doesn't come to the table, decides to go for the bomb, and Israel, likely with U.S. support, has to strike – at least the public at home and abroad will understand why.