

# WebMemo



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## Don't Be Misled by NIE on Iran's Nuclear Efforts

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The newly released key judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," contained a startling bombshell: the conclusion that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. It is not known what prompted this unprecedented reversal of intelligence analysis, since the unclassified report contained only a summary of key judgments and excluded the evidence on which the judgments were made. Already, however, several knowledgeable experts have charged that the NIE is critically flawed.<sup>1</sup> The Bush Administration should establish a bipartisan fast-track commission to investigate the classified evidence and review the judgments of the NIE.

**Time for Team B.** Although the new NIE contains many points in common with a previous NIE written in 2005, there is a surprising change regarding a reported halt in work on nuclear weapons in 2003 that raises questions about the nature of any new evidence or new ways of looking at the Iranian nuclear issue. The Bush Administration should establish an independent bipartisan panel of experts to take a fresh look at this crucial issue. A controversial 1995 NIE on ballistic missile threats prompted the creation of a similar commission chaired by Donald Rumsfeld that shed considerable new light on that issue.

There is always the danger that the new information about Iran's nuclear weapons program is disinformation or misinformation, although the NIE seems to rule this out by attributing "high confidence" to the judgment that Iran's nuclear weapons program was actually halted. It is also possible that

new, better-hidden programs were started up after the old ones were closed down, but this point is not directly addressed in the unclassified document that summarizes the 150-page NIE.

Even if the key judgments of the most recent NIE prove to be entirely correct, they could be taken out of context by misleading news coverage that suggests that the long-term threat posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions has ebbed. Over time, this view would undermine the international pressure that the NIE concludes is essential to dissuade Iran from continuing its long-running nuclear weapons efforts.

One misleading aspect of the new NIE is that it defines a "nuclear weapons program" very narrowly as "Iran's nuclear weapon design and weaponization work and covert uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related work." But Tehran may have halted its weapon design work because it already has a suitable weapon design. Aided by A.Q. Khan's nuclear smuggling network and North Korea, Iran may have made so much progress in more than a decade of clandestine work that an easily reversible halt of some programs in 2003 may have little practical effect in restricting its ability to eventually build a nuclear weapon.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Iran/wm1727.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Iran/wm1727.cfm)

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The chief bottleneck in Iranian efforts to attain a nuclear weapon may not be the weaponization work, but the acquisition of enough weapons-grade fissile material to arm a bomb. This makes Iran's accelerating work on uranium enrichment, with approximately 3,000 centrifuges at its Natanz facility ostensibly dedicated to producing fuel for its civilian nuclear power program, an important part of its potential weapons efforts. It is therefore a mistake to downplay Iran's intensifying efforts to enrich uranium in continued defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions. Iran may simply be trying to master the most difficult part of the weapons building process—enriching the uranium fuel—before taking the final step of weaponization.

The NIE recognizes this possibility by including the following caveat:

Iranian entities are continuing to develop a range of technical capabilities that could be applied to producing nuclear weapons, if a decision is made to do so. For example, Iran's civilian uranium enrichment program is continuing.

This important point, buried in the text of the document, is often overlooked in press reports about the NIE.

**The Blurred Nuclear Line.** The line between civilian and military nuclear programs can easily be blurred, especially by a ruthless regime that has been repeatedly caught lying about its activities and still refuses to admit that it ever had a nuclear weapons program. While enriched uranium is used to fuel nuclear reactors, it can also be enriched to higher levels to fuel nuclear weapons. Drawing a distinction between Iran's "declared civil work" on uranium enrichment and military programs is risky, because once Tehran has perfected enrichment techniques, it can cross the line into military uses relatively easily.

To various degrees, Russia, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and South Africa all masked their military nuclear programs behind civilian nuclear power

programs. This is one reason why the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is so focused on civilian nuclear programs. It also explains why Iran's decision to restart its uranium enrichment activities in 2005, after halting them in 2003, was so alarming. Yet, a discussion of Iran's reversal of its freeze on uranium enrichment is missing from the unclassified summary of key judgments. It would not be surprising to discover that Iran also restarted its weaponization efforts after temporarily suspending them in 2003.

Also missing is any insight into Iran's turbulent politics and the implications that follow for its nuclear policy. The alleged halt in military programs occurred in 2003 under the reformist regime of President Mohammed Khatami, but the installation of the hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 triggered a broad hardening of Iranian policy across a wide range of issues. Given Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric, his virulent criticism of the foreign policy of his predecessor, his reversal of the freeze on uranium enrichment, and his personal denunciation of Iranian "traitors" who cooperate with foreign powers to restrict Iran's nuclear program, it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad's government would long abide by a halt in nuclear weapons programs imposed by a previous government led by his political enemies. Yet the NIE summary document ignores these major changes in Iran's political leadership since 2003.

The NIE also does not address related military developments, such as Iran's missile programs, some of which make little sense unless the missiles are to be armed with nuclear warheads. Nor does it appear to adequately take into account the huge investment that Iran has made in an extensive nuclear infrastructure that it does not need for a civilian power program. Given the high financial and opportunity costs of creating this nuclear infrastructure, how likely is the Iranian regime to refrain from using it to develop nuclear weapons that could significantly advance its core security and foreign policy goals?

1. See John R. Bolton, "The Flaws in the Iran Report," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2007, at [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/05/AR2007120502234.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/05/AR2007120502234.html); and Valerie Lincy and Gary Milhollin, "In Iran We Trust?" *The New York Times*, December 6, 2007, at [www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/opinion/06milhollin.html?\\_r=1&ref=opinion&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/opinion/06milhollin.html?_r=1&ref=opinion&oref=slogin).

Another misleading aspect of the NIE summary document is that it blandly attributes Iran's decision to halt its military nuclear program to "international pressure." However, in 2003, there was little serious international pressure exerted on Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program. In fact, the United Nations Security Council still has not imposed strong and effective sanctions on Iran and is unlikely to do so in the future, given the diplomatic foot-dragging of Russia and China.

Although the EU3 (Britain, France, and Germany) began a stillborn diplomatic dialogue with Iran, the chief source of pressure on Iran in 2003 was the threat of American military action. The chilling demonstration effect of the two U.S. military interventions that displaced the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq undoubtedly had a salutary effect on Tehran. This certainly was the case with Libya. Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi subsequently admitted to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi that his decision to halt Libya's weapons of mass destruction programs was due to a fear that the United States would take military action against Libya, as it had against Iraq.

**Conclusion.** Unfortunately, the political impact of the NIE could eventually reduce external pressure on Iran by undermining the Bush Administration's efforts to mobilize an international coalition to

impose stronger sanctions. At a joint news conference yesterday, French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel made reassuring statements stressing the need to maintain pressure on Iran. But it remains to be seen how long this determination will last, particularly now that Russia and China have been given more latitude to dilute and delay any sanctions at the U.N. Security Council.

The new NIE also weakens the perceived threat of military action against Iran, which is a major source of leverage necessary to affect Tehran's thinking on the nuclear weapons issue. This increases the risk that Iran will renew its weaponization efforts, if in fact it ever stopped. The Bush Administration should seek to create a commission to examine the evidence assembled in the latest Iran NIE, its conclusions, and some of the many unanswered questions raised by the report. Otherwise, misleading press coverage could feed the public perception that the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran is receding. That would gradually create an international environment in which Iran becomes increasingly free to realize its long-held ambition to acquire nuclear weapons.

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