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The Iranian Threat

The Iranian regime continues to defy repeated international demands to halt its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. Iran is reportedly testing an advanced P-2 centrifuge, which is capable of enriching uranium—the key fuel for nuclear weapons—at two to three times the speed of older models. The head of U.S. intelligence Mike McConnell said in February that Iran could “probably” produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon by as early as 2010. As Iran continues to reject international demands to suspend its nuclear program, the need for increased international pressure on Tehran grows. Below are frequently asked questions about Iran’s nuclear program and current efforts to stop it.

Q: Why is Iran a threat to the United States, Israel and other U.S. allies?

A: Despite foreshadowing efforts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability as a non-nuclear party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran, according to the latest U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, was operating a covert weapons program as recent as 2003. This conclusion of the NIE reinforces the danger posed by Iran's continuing nuclear program. Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism; it funds, trains and arms Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other terrorist groups. Iran is already the leading military power in the Persian Gulf and continues to modernize its missile capability and to extend the range of its weapons. Iran vows to destroy Israel and calls for a world without the United States.



As Iran continues to advance its uranium enrichment efforts, it also is extending the reach of its ballistic missile arsenal.

Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell said in recent testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee that Iran continues to make progress in its ability to enrich uranium and could technically be capable of producing enough fissile material for a weapon in less than two years. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported earlier this year that Iran had conducted sophisticated research on technologies needed to build and deliver a nuclear weapon. Using corroborating evidence from several countries the IAEA detailed studies carried out by Iran on how to modify its Shihab-3 ballistic missile to accommodate a nuclear warhead.

Q: Has Iran halted all of its nuclear-related activities, including uranium enrichment?

A: No. Iran is proceeding aggressively with two of the three key elements needed to become a nuclear weapons power. First, and most challenging, is the difficult process of producing fissile material—enriched uranium or plutonium—to fuel a bomb. Second, there must be a delivery system

such as a ballistic missile. Third, an actual weapon—such as a missile warhead—must be fabricated. The regime is on the verge of mastering the entire nuclear fuel cycle, including the mining, conversion, enrichment and stockpiling of uranium that could ultimately form the cores of a nuclear weapons arsenal. It is also developing and deploying an increasingly advanced arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles ideal for delivering atomic warheads.

As to whether Iran has permanently frozen its now-confirmed covert program to design and build a nuclear weapon, the jury is still out. While the NIE states that this effort was likely halted in 2003, it is less certain that the building of a bomb, along with a clandestine uranium enrichment program at a hidden location, has not resumed in the intervening years. Admiral McConnell told the Senate Intelligence Committee in February that the U.S. does not know whether Iran's nuclear weaponization program was restarted, saying, "We assess with moderate confidence that Tehran had not restarted these activities as of mid-2007, but since they comprised an unannounced secret effort which Iran attempted to hide, we do not know if these activities have been restarted.

In addition, the IAEA Board of Governors' most recent report said that Iran is continuing construction of the heavy-water production plant at Arak in direct violation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1737, 1747 and 1803.

Q: Can Iran's civil nuclear program also be used as part of a nuclear weapons program?

A: Yes. Most of what the Iranian authorities describe as a peaceful program aimed at providing the oil and natural gas-rich nation with yet more energy resources is in fact perfectly suited to supplying the building blocks of a military nuclear arms stockpile. The low-enriched uranium that Iran is currently churning out with increasing efficiency at its Natanz nuclear plant—and perhaps at another hidden site—is purportedly for use in power reactors. Yet such uranium can be further purified into the highly enriched uranium needed for an atomic bomb with only minor modifications to the gas centrifuge cascades that the regime is installing at the site to amass fissile material. Cascades are linked machines that rotate at supersonic speeds to enrich the uranium needed to produce fuel for nuclear reactors or bombs.

Likewise, the Iranian heavy-water reactor being built at Arak, and even the Russian-built reactor at Bushehr, can serve as the source for bomb-grade plutonium if Iran constructs a facility to extract this alternate fissile material from used reactor fuel—something well within the country's technical capabilities. In fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency has reported evidence that Iran has experimented with plutonium separation.

By contrast, there is absolutely no visible evidence—such as power lines linking to the facility—that would indicate that Iran's reactor at Bushehr is actually intended to produce electricity for civilian use.

Q: If Iran has in fact stopped its efforts to actually build a bomb, how quickly can such efforts be restarted?

A: Even if the latest U.S. National Intelligence Estimate is correct in its assessment that Iran fully halted its bomb-building program in 2003 and has not resumed it, this fact makes relatively little difference in terms of the timetable for Iran to field a nuclear arsenal should it choose to do so. Assuming Iran had not already completed most of the steps needed for weaponization at the time it chose to pause in 2003, it would still take a relatively short time—based on the plans Iran is known to have in its possession—to assemble a workable bomb and join it with a ballistic missile. Six months to a year from restart to deployment is not an unreasonable estimate.

Q: Why is Russia providing fuel for Iran's nuclear reactor in Bushehr? Should it be doing this at this time?

A: Russia built the reactor in Bushehr and promised to provide Iran with low-enriched uranium to feed into the reactor. The deal stipulates that Russia will take back the spent fuel produced during the process of feeding the uranium into the reactor, thus limiting the risk that the nuclear material could be siphoned off for possible use in weapons. Russia claims that providing the Iranians with a secure source of nuclear fuel will undercut Iran's justification for its continuing enrichment activities. However, Iranian leaders, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have rejected such thinking, asserting that Iran will not give up its right to the full nuclear fuel cycle.



As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council that approved three resolutions requiring that Iran suspend its enrichment of uranium, the Russians should not be providing low-enriched uranium to the Iranians until Tehran suspends its enrichment activities. While feeding low-enriched uranium into a light-water reactor such as Bushehr does not pose a major proliferation risk, Iran has used the civilian nuclear program associated with Bushehr as a cover for its covert nuclear weapons program.

Tehran has used the Bushehr nuclear reactor to conceal its clandestine nuclear weapons activities.

Q: Why do we need further sanctions on Iran if it has supposedly stopped its nuclear weapons program?

A: First, the U.S. does not know for sure that Iran stopped its weapons program. Admiral McConnell told the Senate Intelligence Committee in February that the U.S. does not know whether Iran's nuclear weaponization program was restarted. In any event, the National Intelligence Estimate defined a nuclear weapons program only as design and manufacture of a warhead. That is the least difficult and least time-consuming part of obtaining a nuclear weapons capability, and could be done in a matter of months whenever Iran is able to produce highly enriched uranium.

Iran continues to make significant progress in its ability to enrich uranium—the critical component for nuclear weapons—in direct defiance of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions. If Iran is allowed to master the uranium enrichment technology, it will be able to restart its weapons program easily, combine it with the enriched uranium and produce a bomb.

Tough sanctions offer the best hope to dissuade Iran from resuming its nuclear weapons program and to suspend its enrichment activity. The recent NIE concludes that Iran's actions have been guided by a cost-benefit calculus and is vulnerable to additional pressure. Intensifying sanctions would raise the costs for Iran and increase the chances that it will comply with the U.N. Security Council requirement to suspend its enrichment program and to ensure that it does not resume its weaponization efforts. Iran temporarily suspended its enrichment of uranium in 2003, only to resume such activities in early 2006. The same may well be true for its putative halt in weaponization if Iran does not feel it will face the prospect of tougher sanctions.

Q: Why has the U.N. Security Council demanded Iran stop its uranium enrichment activity?

A: The U.N. Security Council has three times passed resolutions under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter—mandatory under international law—demanding Iran suspend its uranium enrichment

activity. If Iran is allowed to master the technology needed to enrich uranium, it will be able to restart its weapons program easily, combine it with the enriched uranium and produce a bomb. The IAEA said in its most recent report that Iran is operating close to 3,000 centrifuges, which if running efficiently are sufficient to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb in one year. The enrichment facility at Natanz has a capacity for more than 54,000 centrifuges, and Iran says it aims to run the facility at capacity. If so, Iran could produce enough highly enriched uranium for between 20 to 40 nuclear weapons a year.

Q: What is the view among U.S. allies concerning the threat posed by Iran?

A: The overwhelming majority of U.S. allies continue to view Iran as a threat that must be confronted with additional economic and political pressure. The leaders of the EU-3, Germany, France and Great Britain, have all reasserted that Iran remains a danger. French President Nicholas Sarkozy said, “Notwithstanding the latest elements, everyone is fully conscious of the fact that there is a will among the Iranian leaders to obtain nuclear weapons... I don’t see why we should renounce sanctions.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “Iran continues to pose a danger,” while British Foreign Secretary David Miliband called on the U.N. Security Council to pass a third sanctions resolution. “We cannot be afraid of diplomacy with teeth,” Miliband said. “The alternatives are all worse.”

Israeli leaders have also spoken out on the continued threat posed by Iran to Israel and the world. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the NIE was not a sign of American retreat from its support of Israel, saying, “The publication of the American NIE report generated an exaggerated debate. Some of us even interpreted the report as an American retreat from its support of Israel. This is groundless. The United States led the global campaign against Iran ... since America was convinced that Iran constitutes a real threat to peace in the region and to vital American interests. This has not changed. Not because I say so—the Americans say so, the British, the Germans and the French say so as well.”

Q: What is Israel’s view of the current status of Iran’s nuclear program?

A: Israel correctly views Iran’s nuclear program as its most serious strategic challenge and a direct threat to the continued existence of the Jewish state, as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for Israel to be “wiped off the map.” In the face of such threats, Israel must take a “worst-case” view of Iran’s progress toward acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. The United States and Israel reportedly share the same information about the Iranian nuclear process, but at times reach different conclusions regarding the significance of various facts. This can, for example, affect Israel’s estimate of when Iran will have the means to produce a weapon, which the Israelis view as the time when the Iranians can independently fabricate all the necessary elements. The United States may view the “point of no return” as the actual Iranian decision to build a weapon, regardless of when they have previously achieved the means to do so.

Q: Why won’t the United States talk to Iran if it has supposedly stopped its nuclear weapons program?

A: The United States and its allies have made repeated efforts in recent years to reach out to Iran in the hope of solving a range of disputes diplomatically. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in May 2006 that the United States would join multilateral talks with Iran if it met the Security Council’s requirement to suspend uranium enrichment. Entering into a dialogue before Iran has complied with U.N. Security Council Resolutions and suspended its uranium enrichment could undermine U.N. Security Council decisions and allow Tehran to use the dialogue as a way to continue advancing its nuclear program.

Rice has reiterated numerous times, including as recently as early December, that the dialogue offer remains on the table and that she is prepared to sit down with her Iranian counterpart “anytime, anywhere—to discuss every facet of our countries’ relationship.” However, Iranian President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rejected the possibility of dialogue and of ending its nuclear program, saying on Nov. 6 that “we didn’t ask for talks. ... If talks are to be held, it is the Iranian nation that has to set conditions, not the arrogant and the criminals. ... The world must know that this nation will not give up one iota of its nuclear rights.”