

# Artificial Intelligence

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Articles & Testimony

**T**hough the White House press release read "President Bush to travel to Middle East to follow up on progress made at Annapolis," his January trip actually centered on Iran, a country he did not visit.

America's friends -- the Persian Gulf monarchs as well as Israel -- fear that the publication of the recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) means the United States is weakening in its resolve to confront the rising threat from Iran. President Bush made his Middle East jaunt, in part, to assure them that that assessment was premature.

Since its appearance in December, the NIE has given pause to Israeli policy makers and provided succor for State Department analysts who believe the Bush administration is overestimating the case for Tehran's nuclear intentions. That is because the report implies that the threat from Iran has diminished. But in fact, a careful and close reading of the NIE does not warrant this interpretation. In the end, the report will only make it harder to address a growing threat to world peace.

Indeed, Americans might believe we no longer have to worry about Iran's nuclear program. In fact, the problem is worse because diplomacy may be more complicated, though not necessarily impossible. The most troubling prospect is that the United States and Israel are headed in opposite directions, which could lead to a severe strain in their relationship.

The NIE begins: "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program." That's nice, but it does not matter very much. As the NIE states, "We assess with high confidence that Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so." The key word in that sentence is "eventually" because the most vital question is when Iran will be able to produce its first nuclear weapon. The NIE says nothing about how the reported halt of Iran's nuclear weapons program affects that date.

Despite the impression given by the wording in the NIE, Iran has by no means stopped its nuclear activities. In fact, Iran proudly shows off the progress it is making with its huge uranium-enrichment facilities. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed ElBaradei, has said that when those facilities are completed, Iran would need only "a few months" more to build a nuclear weapon. That estimate suggests that the hard part is enriching the uranium -- not making a bomb. In other words, the wording of the NIE is deceptive: building a bomb is relatively easy. Producing nuclear material is not.

That is why the 40-year effort to verify and enforce the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has been based on controlling the production of fissile material -- that is, enriched uranium or plutonium. NPT enforcement is based on safeguarding nuclear material, not only looking to see if a country is building a weapon. Iran does not need to have a weapons program -- that is, a bomb-design program -- until it is close to producing fissile material. After all, Iran does not need a sophisticated warhead such as the ones that go atop missiles. It could put a bulky, heavy nuclear device into a ship container or a truck -- similar to the truck Iran's proxies used to bomb the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983.

So what does the NIE say about when Iran will be able to make sufficient fissile material for a bomb? The old estimate, made in 2005, stated this was "unlikely before early-to-mid next decade." The new NIE says, "Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough HEU [highly enriched uranium] for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame." The only caveat is from the State Department's intelligence arm, which "judges that Iran is unlikely to achieve this capability before 2013." How nice -- we may even have as long as five years. That is better than nothing, but it is not very good.

International Pressure, U.S. Engagement or Military Force?

The NIE argues that Iran can be persuaded through sticks and carrots: "We judge with high confidence that the halt [in Iran's nuclear weapons program] was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work."

Iran's decision to suspend its nuclear weapons program, in fact, came in the fall of 2003, after the British, French and German leaders bluntly told Iran: suspend your nuclear program or suffer the consequences. Their stand was unprecedented in its forcefulness for the usually mild Europeans. And, of course, they acted in the wake of what then looked like a successful U.S. invasion of Iraq. The lesson the NIE draws is that when Iran sees a united international community, it backs down.

"Our assessment that the [nuclear weapons] program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously," the NIE reads.

I think that is correct; a longtime theme of my work has been Iran's vulnerability to influence on the nuclear issue, so it would be comforting to think that the NIE is accurate in this regard. But honesty as an analyst compels me to report that the NIE provides little reason to come to this conclusion.

The alternative, more cynical interpretation from many of my Israeli friends is that Iran understood that suspending its nuclear weapons program would have no effect on its progress toward nuclear weapons, yet would reduce the risk that IAEA inspectors would discover Iran's true intentions. In other words, the NIE displays undue confidence that the U.S. intelligence community knows not just what happened but the reasons why.

That over-confidence fits a pattern. The sad reality is that the U.S. intelligence community's track record on Iran suggests that its knowledge has been not much better than it was about Iraq or North Korea. As the new NIE points out, the 2005 estimate assessed "with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons," whereas the new estimate is that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in fall 2003 -- well before the 2005 estimate came out.

Since the intelligence community has now decided it was wrong in 2005, one might think that U.S. intelligence agencies would be more cautious about what they now purport to know. It is possible that the new information is the last word on the subject, but it is vital to remember that deciding whether or not Iran is "determined" is a matter of interpretation, not just information.

According to the NIE, Iran did in fact have a covert nuclear weapons program up until 2003. If that information is correct, then Iran has been in complete violation of its obligations under the NPT, both by having a program until 2003 and then not reporting it up through the present day. Only full disclosure can provide confidence that Iran will not restart the program.

What if Iran gets to the brink of a bomb?

If Iran gets to the brink of a bomb, then there will be a vigorous debate about what to do. The two obvious alternatives are: stop Iran's nuclear program by force or live with it by deterring it. Military force is always a terrible choice, so we need to carefully consider whether there is a better alternative. Deterrence sounds attractive; after all, it worked

during the Cold War.

But deterrence is not a simple policy. Even during the Cold War, it meant accepting great risks, as evident from the Cuban missile crisis. And deterring a nuclear Iran is likely to prove much more difficult than deterrence was during the Cold War for a host of reasons:

- The Cold War required committing hundreds of thousands of troops and hundreds of billions of dollars a year for decades. The international community may not have the political will to assemble a broad coalition of states ready to commit forces to deter a nuclear Iran or the staying power to maintain such a military coalition over a period of decades.
- The Cold War saw mid-size powers like Germany and Italy reluctantly accept protection from the superpowers rather than build their own nuclear weapons. It will be no small challenge to deter the dozens of other potential proliferators who may conclude from Iran's experience that there is little price to be paid for violating the NPT or withdrawing from it. Since Iran's clandestine nuclear activities were brought to light, nine Middle East countries have announced they are rethinking their nuclear options.
- The Middle East security environment is much more complicated than the straightforward East-West Cold War. The Iran-Iraq war killed a half million people, at least 10 times more than have died in all Israeli-Arab fighting. Introduce nuclear weapons into this messy situation, and many more may die.
- The Soviet Union more or less lived up to agreements it made. The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of dissimulation. Iran may be tempted to try covert, deniable nuclear weapons delivery -- for instance, by terrorist groups -- which the United States would have difficulty attributing to it.
- For all its faults, the Soviet Union was a tightly run ship. Iran's regime is dotted with factions that seem to pay little attention to any central authority. What's worse, the Revolutionary Guards, the same radical elements that provide support to terrorists, control aspects of the nuclear program. To say that there are potential command-and-control problems is an understatement.
- The Soviet communist system wanted to rule the world. In Islamic Iran, some radical elements appear to be willing to destroy the world. They are so highly confident God is on their side that they are ready to risk bringing on the apocalypse.

What Will Israel Do?

If the United States decides to live with a nuclear-armed Iran, Israel may not accede. For the United States, Iranian nuclear capability is a big problem but by no means an existential threat. By contrast, Israel has to worry that Iran will supplement the hundreds of millions of dollars it spends each year to arm those fighting to wipe Israel off the map ( Hamas and Hezbollah) with nuclear threats aimed at the same purpose.

If Israel decides to use force on its own, that would have many disadvantages for U.S. interests. An Israeli strike would convert a global issue about Iran's failure to comply with its obligations under international treaties into an Iranian-Israeli dispute, where many around the world would automatically take sides against Israel.

An Israeli strike could engender such international criticism that Iran would be confident it can rebuild without fearing international disapproval, much less a second round of strikes. Many around the world would assume that Washington gave Israel permission, if not assistance, so the United States would face much the same reaction as if it had carried out a raid itself. That could mean vicious Iranian responses against U.S. interests.

If Israel acts against the wishes of the United States, the worst of all situations would be created if it does the job poorly. In such a case, the threat from Iran's nuclear program would be magnified, and the U.S.-Israel alliance would be damaged. Unfortunately, this case is distinctly possible. This makes it all the more urgent that we reinforce

diplomacy with tough sanctions and close international coordination at the highest levels to maximize the chances, admittedly fading, that Iran agrees to a compromise.

Patrick Clawson, the deputy director for research of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the author of several books on Iran. ❖

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