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Understanding the Key Judgments in the New NIE on Iranian Nuclear Weapons

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The new NIE on Iranian nuclear weapons, “**Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,**” is a striking document in many ways:

- On the one hand, it indicates that Iran suspended a nuclear weapons effort in 2003, and is susceptible to international pressure and negotiation. The US intelligence community analysis indicates that it is highly probable that the US and the international community have some 4-7 years to negotiate before Iran could become a nuclear power. It provides a major argument against any early military action against Iran, and it refutes much of the hard-line rhetoric emerging from various neoconservatives. In broad terms, it reinforces the moderate, pro-negotiation positions of Secretary Rice, Secretary Gates, Admiral Mullen, and Admiral Fallon.
- On the other hand, it provides the first solid indication that the US intelligence community had the equivalent of a “smoking gun” to confirm that Iran had an active nuclear weapons program. It shows far less confidence that this program has continued to be halted than that it was halted for a time in 2003. It states Iran’s enrichment programs allow it to move forward towards a nuclear weapon effort in spite of any continuing suspension of a formal nuclear weapons program, and it raises serious doubts as to whether Iran’s longer term efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are negotiable. It does not in any way indicate that the UN effort to prevent further Iranian weapons development is unnecessary or that further sanctions are not needed to limit or halt Iran’s efforts.
- The document is the summary of a 150-page NIE that the *Washington Post* reports was based on some 1,500 intelligence indicators, including intercepts of communications from Iranian military officers. It is not an intelligence report. It does not portray the range of opinion or most dissenting views. It does not describe the nature of the indicators and analytic methods used. This is a critical point because past outside commentary on NIEs, and attempts to parse out the words in summary judgments, have proved to be highly unreliable. Moreover, a “war of leaks” almost inevitably follows between advocates of one policy position or another.

- The summary does not address what the US intelligence community does and does not know about Iran's efforts in each of the five areas the NIE addressed:
 - What are Iran's intentions toward developing nuclear weapons?
 - What domestic factors affect Iran's decision-making on whether to develop nuclear weapons?
 - What external factors affect Iran's decision-making on whether to develop nuclear weapons?
 - What is the range of potential Iranian actions concerning the development of nuclear weapons, and the decisive factors that would lead Iran to choose one course of action over another?
 - What is Iran's current and projected capability to develop nuclear weapons? What are our key assumptions, and Iran's key chokepoints/vulnerabilities?
- The NIE only indirectly addresses the limits in US ability to detect and track Iranian covert efforts. It does not address related military developments like Iran's missile programs, many of which only seem to make sense if armed with a nuclear warhead.
- No mention is made of the progress Iran has made in nuclear weapons design before 2003 or to date. It does not address any of key issues indicating that Iran was developing nuclear missile warheads. It does not address the transfer of nuclear weapons designs from North Korea and the AQ Khan network, the "Green Salt" and "Laptop" issues being addressed by the IAEA, or what kind of nuclear weapons Iran was found to be working on in 2003. No hint is made of Iranian progress in completing fission, boosted, or thermonuclear weapons designs.

The Need to Actually read the Document

It is very important for anyone using or making judgments about the document to actually read the full text of the judgments the NIE makes about Iran's nuclear program. Press summaries and outside commentary are not a substitute for responsible literacy and attentions to details. The document is available at (http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf).

This is particularly important because the first few pages carefully define the meaning of the words used in assessing Iran's efforts. The definition of levels of

confidence is particularly important in understanding what the document actually says:

- *High confidence* generally indicates that our judgments are based on high-quality information, and/or that the nature of the issue makes it possible to render a solid judgment. A “high confidence” judgment is not a fact or a certainty, however, and such judgments still carry a risk of being wrong.
- • *Moderate confidence* generally means that the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence.
- • *Low confidence* generally means that the information’s credibility and/or plausibility is questionable, or that the information is too fragmented or poorly corroborated to make solid analytic inferences, or that we have significant concerns or problems with the sources.

It is also important to point out that the US intelligence community has made major changes and improvements in its intelligence methods in recent years. Accordingly, while the document does provide the summary comparison of the judgments in the new document with past judgments made in a May 2005 NIE shown at the end of this report, it should be noted that the intelligence collection and analytic efforts that created the two documents are not directly comparable and that outside attempts to make word for word comparisons, and judge credibility can be highly misleading.

Examining the NIEs Key Judgments

A careful reading shows that the US intelligence community made careful caveats about its knowledge of whether Iran has continued to halt its program and the level of confidence the intelligence community has regarding Iran’s actions.

The full text of the key portions of the NIE’s judgments are shown below, and key points are outlined in red:

We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons Program (For the purposes of this Estimate, by “nuclear weapons program” we mean Iran’s nuclear weapon design and weaponization work and covert uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related work; **we do not mean Iran’s declared civil work related to uranium conversion and enrichment.**);

...we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.

We judge with high confidence that the halt, and Tehran's announcement of its decision to suspend its declared uranium enrichment program and sign an Additional Protocol to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement, was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work.

- We assess with high confidence that until fall 2003, Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons.
- We judge with high confidence that the halt lasted at least several years. (Because of intelligence gaps discussed elsewhere in this Estimate, however, DOE and the NIC assess with only moderate confidence that the halt to those activities represents a halt to Iran's entire nuclear weapons program.)
- We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.
- We continue to assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Iran does not currently have a nuclear weapon.
- Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005. Our assessment that the 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.

B. We continue to assess with low confidence that Iran probably has imported at least some weapons-usable fissile material, but still judge with moderate-to-high confidence it has not obtained enough for a nuclear weapon. We cannot rule out that Iran has acquired from abroad—or will acquire in the future—a nuclear weapon or enough fissile material for a weapon. Barring such acquisitions, if Iran wants to have nuclear weapons it would need to produce sufficient amounts of fissile material indigenously—which we judge with high confidence it has not yet done.

C. We assess centrifuge enrichment is how Iran probably could first produce enough fissile material for a weapon, if it decides to do so. Iran resumed its declared centrifuge enrichment activities in January 2006, despite the continued halt in the nuclear weapons program. Iran made significant progress in 2007 installing centrifuges at Natanz, but we judge with moderate confidence it still faces significant technical problems operating them.

- We judge with moderate confidence that the earliest possible date Iran would be technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon is late 2009, but that this is very unlikely.

- We judge with moderate confidence Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame. (INR judges Iran is unlikely to achieve this capability before 2013 because of foreseeable technical and programmatic problems.) All agencies recognize the possibility that this capability may not be attained until after 2015.

D. 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. We also assess with high confidence that since fall 2003, Iran has been conducting research and development projects with commercial and conventional military applications—some of which would also be of limited use for nuclear weapons.

E. We do not have sufficient intelligence to judge confidently whether Tehran is willing to maintain the halt of its nuclear weapons program indefinitely while it weighs its options, or whether it will or already has set specific deadlines or criteria that will prompt it to restart the program.

- Our assessment that Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressure indicates Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs. This, in turn, suggests that some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways, might—if perceived by Iran's leaders as credible—prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program. It is difficult to specify what such a combination might be.

- We assess with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership probably see between nuclear weapons development and Iran's key national security and foreign policy objectives, and given Iran's considerable effort from at least the late 1980s to 2003 to develop such weapons. In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons—and such a decision is inherently reversible.

F. We assess with moderate confidence that Iran probably would use covert facilities—rather than its declared nuclear sites—for the production of highly enriched uranium for a weapon. A growing amount of intelligence indicates Iran was engaged in covert uranium conversion and uranium enrichment activity, but

we judge that these efforts probably were halted in response to the fall 2003 halt, and that these efforts probably had not been restarted through at least mid-2007.

G. We judge with high confidence that Iran will not be technically capable of producing and reprocessing enough plutonium for a weapon before about 2015.

H. 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 Issues that Need to be Addressed

It is important to note several things about these judgments:

- No mention is made of exactly what nuclear weapons efforts Iran halted and whether this included all covert and dual-use programs.
- The NIE unambiguously says that US intelligence did have high confidence Iran was actively working on nuclear weapons until 2003, and the intelligence community expresses important levels of uncertainty over whether Iran has resumed its nuclear weapons effort.
- Iran's current enrichment efforts have and will continue to move it closer to being able to deploy nuclear weapons even if key elements of its weapons design and production activity have been halted or suspended.
- The NIE does not address any of the major issues and uncertainties still being examined by the IAEA. The omission of any discussion of the Green Salt, Lap Top, and warhead issues is particularly important.
- The commentary on the uncertainty relating to research and dual-use activity is particularly important. Iran is known to have worked on technology that could be used produce the high explosive lens, uranium machining, neutron initiator, neutron reflector and other components needed for a fission weapon. Ongoing covert research in each area would be very easy to disperse and conceal. Passive and conventional high explosive testing of actual warhead and weapons designs using non-fissile material would not provide any indicators other than – at most – those associated with conventional high explosives. Missile testing using warheads with such assemblies and similar bomb testing would probably only be detectable through a major leak of human intelligence.
- Moreover, no mention is made of Iran's long-range missile programs, but Iran is clearly continuing to improve its ability to develop advanced nuclear delivery systems and has announced two new missile programs within the last month.

In short, the NIE is good news in that it indicates that past efforts to pressure Iran have had some impact, and there is time for negotiation and to find alternatives to attacking Iran – such as the containment approach suggested by General Abizaid. It does not, however, make any promises for the future, or resolve the major credibility problems the US incurred in providing incorrect intelligence on Iraq.

The bad news is that many will focus only on taking the more positive news out of context, and judge credibility of the basis of comparisons between the 2005 and 2007 estimates while ignoring the full text of the key judgments and the many areas where the unclassified summary leaves more questions than answers.

Key Differences Between the Key Judgments of This Estimate on Iran's Nuclear Program and the May 2005 Assessment 2005 IC Estimate 2007 National Intelligence Estimate

2005 IC Estimate

Assess with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons despite its international obligations and international pressure, but we do not assess that Iran is immovable.

We have moderate confidence in projecting when Iran is likely to make a nuclear weapon; we assess that it is unlikely before early-to-mid next decade.

Iran could produce enough fissile material for a weapon by the end of this decade if it were to make more rapid and successful progress than we have seen to date.

2007 NIE

Judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program. Judge with high confidence that the halt lasted at least several years. (DOE and the NIC have moderate confidence that the halt to those activities represents a halt to Iran's entire nuclear weapons program.) Assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons. Judge with high confidence that the halt was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work. Assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.

We judge with moderate confidence that the earliest possible date Iran would be technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon is late 2009, but that this is very unlikely.

We judge with moderate confidence that the earliest possible date Iran would be technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon is late 2009, but that this is very unlikely. We judge with moderate confidence Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame. (INR judges that Iran is unlikely to achieve this capability before 2013 because of foreseeable technical and programmatic problems.)