

The Impact of the NIE: Assessing International Reactions

Emily B. Landau

One of the most interesting aspects of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities, released on December 3, 2007, is that for all the fanfare, it hasn't changed anyone's mind regarding the seriousness of the threat – at least among those knowledgeable about the issue. Among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, the tendencies and positions of the weeks before the NIE are basically the same as in the weeks following its release: those who viewed Iran with concern continue to do so, and the same is true for those less concerned. Among the Arab Gulf states and in Egypt, attempts in recent weeks to adopt a somewhat more conciliatory position toward Iran should not be misunderstood as indicating a changed position on the seriousness of the threat. On the contrary, these moves – including the Saudi invitation to Ahmadinejad to take part in the Hajj – are more likely a reflection of their fear that international pressure on Iran may now let up, leaving them even more vulnerable to an increasingly powerful presence in their regional arena, than any sense that the danger of a nuclear Iran has passed in light of the new assessment.

Still, there is no doubt that the report has had an impact on international efforts to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions, and has com-

In early December 2007, the US National Intelligence Council published a new assessment regarding Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities. The report, a non-classified version of a more detailed and classified text, states that in the fall of 2003 Iran halted its covert nuclear weapons program, and there is no evidence that the program has since been restarted. The report, which raised sharp questions as to the timing of its release and its contents, sent shockwaves across the international community.

Dr. Emily Landau, head of the INSS Arms Control and Regional Security Program, and Dr. Ephraim Asculai, a senior research associate at INSS, examine the National Intelligence Estimate from two different vantage points, the international reaction to the report

plicated the coordinated and determined action necessary to confront Iran. This is because following its release, headlines in the media – which heralded variations on the common mantra that “Iran stopped its nuclear weapons drive in 2003” – gave a boost to those interested in playing down the threat over the

Cont. on p. 44

Dr. Emily B. Landau,
senior research
associate at INSS

The Implications of the National Intelligence Estimate

Ephraim Asculai



and the significance of the estimate itself. Their conclusions are mixed: on the one hand, those familiar with the issue did not change their positions as a result of the report. On the other hand, it appears that Iran is determined to attain a nuclear military capability, while the US administration has perforce been relieved of taking a difficult decision on the matter.

It is uncertain why the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was worded the way it was and why it was publicized at this time. In any case, the unclassified version of the November 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate caused what could almost be termed an uproar, since it both came at an unexpected time and implied a situation that

seemingly contradicted the official US stance on the issue of Iran's nuclear project.

The NIE is a document laden with probabilities and confidence levels, and edited in a way that leaves much to the interpretation of the reader. To some readers it brought joy, to others – dismay. Most possible future situations are explicitly or implicitly included in the document. The authors used probabilities and confidence levels extensively to describe these situations, and left the readers the choice of the half-full or the half-empty glass. The following essay distills the main and essentially undisputed facts from the NIE, and then, together with some additional data, evaluates their meaning – specifically, how they may affect future actions aimed at stopping Iranian progress towards achieving a military nuclear capability.

The main points of the NIE are:

- Iranian military entities were developing nuclear weapons in a separate, concealed program until this work was halted in 2003, and there is no information that it has restarted since. The suspension was probably the result of international pressure, indicative of a cost-benefit approach to the issue of nuclear weapons production. Only an Iranian political decision could mandate abandoning nuclear weapons, and this decision is reversible.

Cont. on p. 46

Dr. Ephraim Asculai,
senior research
associate at INSS

International Reactions – cont.

past few years, first and foremost Russia and China. Their case was enhanced by the fact that while the Iranian threat was still regarded as serious, the sense of urgency associated with it among many was lowered. Moreover, support for these two states' positions came from a totally unexpected direction: the US itself. It appeared that the US administration was contradicted directly by its own intelligence services, and Ahmadinejad celebrated the moment – with his joy compounded by Bush's apparent embarrassment.

But if one takes the time to actually read the two and a half pages of "Key Judgments" that comprise the main content of the unclassified version of the estimate, one finds that what is relayed there by no means supports the simplistic messages put forth in its name. Although plagued by unanswered questions and some laconic and confusing formulations, enough disturbing content is included in the NIE to warrant continued international concern and increased pressure on Iran.

First of all, according to the report, until the fall of 2003 Iranian military entities were working "under government direction" to develop nuclear weapons. This is the first time that confirmation has been provided that up to such a late stage Iran was acting in blatant and dangerous defiance of its NPT obligations. The fact that Iran was directly and covertly working to develop nuclear weapons is probably the most severe message of the report.

The second issue of concern is that the report states clearly that when referring to Iran's nuclear weapons program that was stopped in 2003 it does *not* include Iran's work at Natanz on uranium enrichment (in direct defiance of three UN Security Council

resolutions). Moreover, it explicitly notes the potential dangers of this "civilian" activity: it is highlighted as one example of the "range of technical capabilities" that Iranian entities are continuing to develop that "could be applied to producing nuclear weapons, if a decision is made to do so."

Finally, the report provides no indication of a change in Iran's basic motivation to develop nuclear weapons. On the contrary: the report states with "moderate confidence" that "convincing the Iranian leadership to forego the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership 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 other words, the halt in activity was *tactical* in nature. While the report notes only that the suspension of activity was in response to international pressure at the time, it was probably in response to US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Iran's fears that it was next in line for attack. The Iranian cost/benefit calculation at the time was most likely that it made good sense to halt activity that, if discovered, would provide the much sought-after smoking gun, and would then be used to justify a military attack.

Furthermore, most serious analyses of the new NIE recognize not only that the content of the report itself does not justify complacency with regard to Iran, but that other troubling issues – such as Iran's ballistic missile program – were not included in the report and continue to foster deep concern.

What are the implications of the report for international action in confronting Iran? The fact that the current NIE projects less certainty than the 2005 estimate as far as Iran's

immediate drive to achieve nuclear weapons relegates the US military option against Iran even further back on the back burner. However, such action was not in any case imminent before the NIE. The report likely lowers the prospect of Israeli military action as well, although some argue that with Israel sensing a less determined international community, it will be more impelled to take matters into its own hands. Still, it is difficult to see how this can be done without coordination with the US; as such, the US decision does have implications for Israel.

As for sanctions, it is not clear that the NIE will have much independent impact: the dilemmas are the same as they were before the report was released, with the US and European states poised for action and Russia and China dragging their feet. A decision on sanctions should have been taken back in May 2007, and the dynamics of delay over the past eight months speak for themselves. On the eve of the report, there was news of a breakthrough with China in terms of its support for a third round, and in this sense the US lost some momentum; however, according to reports from late January there is a good chance that a third round will be decided on soon. Following the NIE Russia decided to begin the transfer of fuel to Bushahr, clarifying that this will be done under full supervision and with the provision that spent fuel will be returned to Russia. In response, Bush said he supported the deliveries but stressed that they showed that Iran had no legitimate need to enrich uranium at home, a message that has more recently been echoed by Russia itself.

Another important question has to do with prospects of direct US-Iranian dialogue on the nuclear issue. There is perhaps more chance of this happening today than before

the report, and not only because the US military option has receded to the background. The more intriguing dynamic regards Iran, and the sense that it is more interested than in the past in talking to the US. This message was conveyed in a back-handed manner by Ahmadinejad himself, but is also reflected by some of the internal criticism leveled at him after the report was released.¹ In early January, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that while the time was not yet ripe, Iran has never said that relations with the US should be suspended indefinitely.² Obviously, not all Iranians were fooled by the initial headlines “exonerating” Iran in the nuclear realm, and they recognize that many in the world are still interested in maintaining and even increasing the pressure. If the situation reaches the point where Iran demonstrates an interest in talking in order to actually strike a deal, rather than to pass the time, there will be much to discuss between the two states.

Notes

- 1 For Ahmadinejad’s statement see “Iran-US Problems Not to be Solved Through Signals,” Fars News Agency, December 12, 2007: the Iranian president said that if the US takes one or two more steps similar to the NIE, the way would be open for resumed interaction between the two sides.

Criticism of Ahmadinejad came in the wake of his optimism following the NIE. Hassan Rowhani ridiculed the government and claimed that Iran’s international situation was unfavorable. Former foreign minister Kharrazi said Iran had to brace for a third Security Council resolution after the NIE (AFP, Tehran, December 11, 2007). In a speech to students, Mohammad Khatami also said Iran’s international standing was not good and that the country should not welcome threats, referring to the decisions on sanctions (*New York Times*, December 12, 2007).

- 2 BBC News, January 3, 2008.

Enough disturbing content is included in the NIE to warrant continued international concern and increased pressure on Iran.