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INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT AND THE POINT OF NO RETURN: IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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According to an August 2 report in The Washington Post, a recent US intelligence review has projected that Iran is about a decade away from manufacturing the key ingredient for a nuclear weapon, roughly doubling the previous estimate of five years, according to government sources with firsthand knowledge of the new analysis. If the report is accurate, then some time in the not-too-distant future, there will probably be a Congressional hearing involving something like the following exchange:

Question: How long does it take for a country to build a military uranium enrichment capability from scratch?

Answer: About ten years.

Question: Was Iran at square one when the intelligence estimate was produced?

Answer: No. According to its own admissions and statements and IAEA verification findings, it was much more advanced than that.

Question: How come, then, that the US intelligence estimate projected that "Iran is about a decade away from manufacturing the key ingredient for a nuclear weapon..."?

Intelligence assessments of covert unconventional weapons production programs

are notoriously problematic, and recent experience with Iraq inevitably prompts analysts to be even more cautious than before. Nevertheless, the known facts of Iran's program, as reported by both the IAEA and Iran itself, suggest that Iran is much less than ten years' away from a military nuclear capability.

Analyses of the time-frame of any weapons program depend on technical information and knowledge about the intentions of the country's leaders. In this case, at least the technical question is fairly easy to address. Iran is in the midst of a major project to establish a uranium enrichment capability. The nuclear weapons plutonium production route is not being considered here since it is longer, more complicated and probably more vulnerable to outside disruption. But the Iranians have already made major breakthroughs in the enrichment process; they have constructed and operated a Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) and produced the first quantities of feed stocks for the next stage of the project, the gas centrifuge enrichment plant.

The Iranians have also illicitly obtained the centrifuge technology and have manufactured, assembled and tested centrifuges at a concealed facility. By their own admission, they have

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managed to enrich some quantities to low levels. What remains is for them to assemble, test and run a few thousand centrifuges with the feed stocks produced at the UCF. Should they choose to do so, the Iranians could use the large underground facility at Natanz, which is probably almost complete and will be ready in the near future to host the relatively small number of centrifuges needed (the facility can hold about fifty thousand machines). Once the machines are installed and run-in, it is a matter of months, not years, before Iran *could* have the necessary quantity of military-grade enriched uranium for its first nuclear explosive device.

Thus, if Iran decides to withdraw from all existing agreements and obligations, it *could* arrive at its destination within 2-4 years, assuming that there is no outside interference with the program.

There are several ways that this process could be delayed. There could be local technical problems or international interference with the procurement of essential materials and equipment. Other delays could be induced by international political and economical pressure; suspension of work in response to international pressure has thus far been the most effective cause of delay. But there are many unknowns in this equation. It is not clear that a universal embargo on supplies for Iran's nuclear program can be adopted and strictly enforced. And even if sanctions were approved by the Security Council, it is not clear that they would have the desired effect, because Iran may already have passed the stage of dependence on any foreign sources.

That raises the possibility that the situation has gone beyond the "point of no return," a term ordinarily used to imply that enough progress has already been achieved to preclude the possibility of outsiders being able any longer to stop the Iranians from achieving their goal of building nuclear weapons. In fact, the history of military nuclear development shows that such a point does not exist, because leaders' intentions are at

least as important a variable. Many states have stopped their nuclear development while the program was still in its early stages. At the other extreme, South Africa had already produced nuclear weapons and then decided to dismantle them. The motivations for arresting or reversing weapons development programs have ranged from realization that nuclear weapons were irrelevant to real security needs to the fear that they could fall into the hands of undesirable entities.

But whatever Iran might ultimately choose to do, it will quite clearly not have to wait ten years in order to decide. That time-frame can only be sustained by "creative analysis" and reliance on "alternative theories" about known behavior (of the type usually supplied by defense attorneys) whose plausibility depends entirely on acceptance of Iranian explanations of past and current deeds and misdeeds. There are many telltale signs, from missile development to the development of neutron initiators for nuclear devices, which all point in the direction of a weapons program. Therefore, according to the IAEA, the burden of proof for any other explanation of Iranian activities now falls squarely on Iran.

It is entirely possible that the latest Iran estimate by the US was influenced by the backlash against the Iraq WMD intelligence failure. Moreover, such "optimistic" intelligence estimates about Iran lead to strategic scenarios that relieve western policy-makers of the need to take difficult decisions in the near term. "There is time," many will say, and that will reduce the international pressure on Iran. But reducing the pressure will only accelerate Iran's nuclear development, because it will remove the last obstacle for a leadership bent on pushing ahead. And if the more realistic assessment turns out to be correct, the consequences of this intelligence failure could be at least as bad as those of the last one.

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