

BY GREG THIELMANN
AND BENJAMIN LOEHRKE
DECEMBER 5, 2011

The IAEA's November Report on Iran: More Confirmation than Revelation

The release of the International Atomic Energy Agency's latest report on Iran's nuclear program in early November attracted intense media interest and stimulated strong political reactions in the United States and around the world. The IAEA report and its 14-page annex represented a milestone for the Vienna-based agency in terms of its willingness to present detailed information to the public on activities of concern in Iran's nuclear program.

There is significant overlap in the IAEA's descriptions of Iran's nuclear program and the public summary of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate released four years earlier. However, as with the 2007 NIE, much reporting and commentary on the IAEA report has not faithfully captured its findings. For example, one syndicated columnist commented on a leading television network that the IAEA report "says the exact opposite" of the NIE about Iran's nuclear weaponization¹. As a consequence of such confused commentary, important implications of the conclusions in both documents risk being lost.

ACA's senior fellow, Greg Thielmann, and Benjamin Loehrke, senior policy analyst for the Ploughshares Fund, shed light on this subject in an article originally appearing in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists on November 23, 2011.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The latest IAEA report on Iran's nuclear program is consistent with the most heavily publicized conclusion in the 2007 NIE:
 - Iran halted its comprehensive clandestine nuclear weaponization program in late 2003, as a result of international pressure.
- The NIE had charted Iran's progress in establishing the basis for a weaponization program, and assessed that Iran had the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it so chose.
- The NIE assessed with high confidence that the halt to Iran's integrated nuclear weapons program had "lasted at least several years," but that Tehran was "keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons."
- Consistent with official testimony about the updated U.S intelligence assessment completed in 2011, the IAEA report concluded that Iran is pursuing activities highly relevant to a nuclear weapons program, albeit not on the same scale and in a less structured manner than prior to the fall of 2003.
 - The report found no evidence Iran has diverted enriched uranium for weapons purposes or has yet decided to actually build nuclear weapons.

Chain reaction: How the media has Misread the IAEA's report on Iran

When, earlier this month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report on Iran's nuclear program, several media agencies and politicians walked away with two messages: that the Vienna-based agency now refutes past estimates of the US intelligence community, and that Iran is now making a break for the bomb. Both representations are false. Yet these assertions have been repeated often enough to give them traction with the public and Congress.

Most analysts familiar with the report agree that there "is nothing in the report that was not previously known by the governments of the major powers" — a nuclear Iran is "neither imminent nor inevitable." While it is clear that Iran's continuing research on nuclear weapons is a serious concern for international security, there "has been no smoking gun when it comes to Iran's nuclear weapons intentions."

So why the conflicting analyses over a highly bureaucratic and technocratic paper?

Washington talks a lot, but does not read very much. That is the simplest way to explain why commentators overlook the consistency between the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran and the latest IAEA report on Iran's nuclear program.

The 2007 NIE on Iran made the headline-grabbing, high-confidence assessment that, in fall 2003, Iran halted its nuclear weapons program (as distinct from its uranium enrichment and ballistic missile programs). Additionally, the NIE said:

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 lasted at least several years. (Because of intelligence gaps discussed elsewhere in this Estimate, however, [the Energy Department and the National Intelligence Council] 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



The Natanz uranium-enrichment facility, located 180 miles south of Tehran, is shown in this April 2007 photo.

not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.

That is remarkably consistent with the IAEA's latest report, which noted:

[Iran's nuclear weapons effort] ... was stopped rather abruptly pursuant to a "halt order" instruction is-

sued in late 2003 by senior Iranian officials. According to that information, however, staff remained in place to record and document the achievements of their respective projects. ... The agency is concerned because some of the activities undertaken after 2003 would be highly relevant to a nuclear weapon programme.

The NIE left open the possibility that Iran could continue its weapons-relevant activities. With four years of additional perspective, the latest IAEA report gives greater detail on the weapons work that Iran did prior to 2003, then updates the available information on what lesser work occurred after 2003. The new activities included:

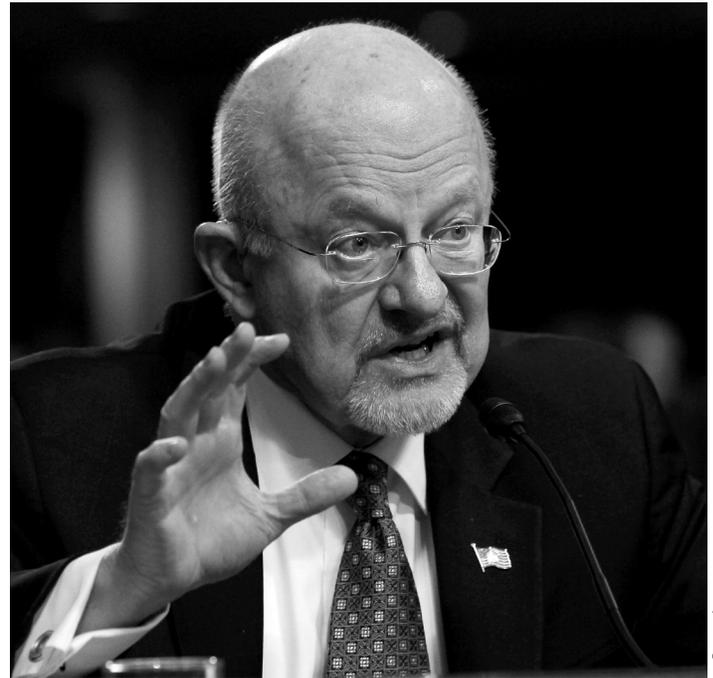
- Engaging in experimental research, after 2003, on hemispherical initiation of high explosives.
- Further validation, after 2006, of a neutron initiator design.
- Conducting modeling studies, in 2008 and 2009, that could determine the yield of a nuclear explosion.

Carrying on scattered research activities does not amount to a full-fledged restart of an integrated weapons program. That type of activity still appears to have halted in 2003. The activities since seem more like Iran is refining its previous understanding of nuclear weapons design — not breaking for a bomb.

Hence, in explaining the latest classified NIE on Iran released in March of this year, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, told the Senate Armed Services Committee:

We continue to assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.

Clapper's testimony was in keeping with the recent IAEA report, which added considerable detail to the sanitized summary of the 2007 NIE.



Mark Wilson/Getty Images

Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, testifies during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on March 10 in Washington, D.C.

The IAEA's comprehensive report is a strong indication that US intelligence in 2007 on Iran's nuclear program was based on solid evidence that has not been upended by the latest information. Iran's situation is not static; continuing reevaluation and updated analyses are necessary for any dynamic and professional intelligence process.

Moreover, sharing the information with the public on the conclusions reached is vital to informing ongoing debate. The IAEA deserves credit both for the quality of its analysis and for sharing its expert opinions with the wider public on these critical issues — particularly since no summary of the latest NIE update has been released.

Pundits and politicians who use the latest IAEA report to attack the 2007 NIE are distorting the information, at best — and, at worst, are playing politics with national security.

ENDNOTE

1. 'Iran continuing on Nuclear Path,' Fox News Special Report, November 9, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/special-report/2011/11/10/iran-continuing-nuclear-path#ixzz1f7GOJ4JZ>

The Arms Control Association (ACA) is an independent, membership-based organization dedicated to providing authoritative information and practical policy solutions to address the dangers posed by the world's most dangerous weapons. The "Solving the Iranian Nuclear Puzzle" briefing series is made possible with the support of the Ploughshares Fund and contributions from individual ACA members.