

Is There Time to Prevent an Iranian Nuclear Weapon?

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September 20, 2009

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ACA THREAT ASSESSMENT BRIEF
Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related Security Threats
Published by the Arms Control Association

Is There Time to Prevent an Iranian Nuclear Weapon?

By Greg Thielmann, Senior Fellow September 10, 2009

The Obama administration has identified September as a time for reassessing its approach to negotiating with Tehran over Iran's nuclear program. It is imperative that this reassessment be based on a realistic appraisal of Iran's weaponization capabilities and limitations and not fall prey to politically motivated hyperbole. Iran's nuclear program is undeniably bringing that country closer to an ability to construct nuclear weapons—bad news for the region, the United States, and the world. Yet, a nuclear-armed Iran is years, not months, away, which is ample time for negotiating an outcome that prevents Iran from becoming a nuclear-weapon state while strengthening the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty regime.

Highlights

- Iran is making steady progress in satisfying two of the three requirements for building deployable nuclear weapons: development of delivery vehicles in the form of ballistic missiles and attainment of a full-scale uranium-enrichment capability.
- The U.S. intelligence community is nonetheless sticking with its 2007 assessment that Iran halted the weaponization portion of its nuclear program in the fall of 2003.
- Discussions of Iran's nuclear program are now replete with talk of "redlines being crossed" and "time running out." Yet, informed projections of the earliest possible arrival of an Iranian nuclear threat to the United States are actually being extended outward.
- Iran now has a sufficient amount of low-enriched uranium to produce at least one nuclear weapon, if enriched to bomb-grade levels. Such enrichment at declared facilities, however, would be detected by International Atomic Energy Agency monitors, sending an unambiguous signal of weapons intent long before use of the weapon could be credibly threatened.
- U.S. intelligence concluded in 2007 that Iran would probably be technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb between 2010 and 2015 but that such enrichment would probably be done covertly, which could take years.
- In previous assessments, U.S. intelligence seriously overestimated how fast Iran would be able to develop and deploy long-range ballistic missiles. According to the latest testimony by intelligence officials, Iran is focusing on medium-range missiles and would not be able to deploy ICBMs prior to 2015 at the earliest.
- Even as Iran masters the nuclear fuel cycle and expands its ballistic missile forces, it must still develop a reliable weapons package and integrate it into a delivery vehicle. There is no evidence that Iran has done this work yet and little reason to believe it could do so quickly.
- Estimating that proliferants could have a nuclear weapon within several months of acquiring sufficient fissile material is a common predictive formula. But the real-world technical challenges of designing a reliable nuclear warhead for placement in a ballistic missile argue for a longer timeline.
- Finding a mutually acceptable outcome through negotiations will be neither quick nor easy. The pace of progress should not be forced in a way that strengthens hard-liners in Iran or leads to counterproductive military actions by U.S. friends in the region. Realistic timelines suggest a space for opportunities to dissuade Iran from building nuclear weapons.

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