

# Updated NIE implies constructive pragmatism in Tehran

Shervin Bolorian

BASIC Notes – Occasional papers on international security policy,  
7 December 2007



British American Security  
Information Council

With the release of the unclassified US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), and news of its conclusion that Iran likely abandoned its weapons program in 2003 circulating on the news wires, speculation exists as to what factors may have guided Iran's decision to close the door on their alleged program.

## **Iraq Plays a Role**

The principle regional shock that played an almost certain role in any Iranian national security calculus was the US military operation in Iraq. Precisely how the downfall of Baghdad may have influenced Iran is uncertain. Some Middle East scholars and former Bush administration staff say that the March 16th invasion of Iraq initiated an unprecedented diplomatic overture from Iran in the form of a "Grand Bargain". The removal of Saddam may have been viewed as an opening to warmer relations with the US, even if it did instill fear among Iranian leaders. But the US rejected that offer later in the spring of 2003 leaving Iran with a diplomatic dead end, and, if anything, a justification for accelerating any weapons program as a deterrent.

While it seems unlikely that the sudden defeat of one US adversary would cause Iran to cease clandestine development in the same year, the threat from Saddam's Iraq, a bitter enemy of the Iranians, had been neutralized. Use of Iraqi WMDs against Iran during the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war was often reported as the principal driving force behind Iran's consideration of nuclear weapons capability, according to leaked national security documents from within Iran, and this likely intensified after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. With Iraq gone, and the US military ostensibly mired in a long term Iraqi stabilization campaign, Iran may have felt secure enough to cease weapons related work.

## **Normalization over Nuclear Weapons**

Whatever Iran's reasoning about Iraq, other factors existed, including knowledge that the game was up after International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors investigated the undeclared sites that allegedly facilitated the secret program. It could have been the case that Iran's secret program had served its purpose, and, upon Iran declaring previously undeclared facilities and opening them to inspection, the government in Tehran realized that the IAEA inspection regime had revealed significant internal weaknesses within the national security infrastructure. With a growing slew of outstanding questions from the IAEA forthcoming, and conflicting statements that were landing the Iranians in political hot water with the IAEA Board of Governors, Tehran may have considered the promise of warmer relations with the West preferential to a controversial weapons program. At the time, there were clear prospects of receiving technology concessions and materials from the EU-3 negotiating team, and it's no secret that the Khatami administration was considering the EU-3 channel as another means of eventually engaging the US and earning security guarantees, which would ensure the survival of the regime. A suspended weapons program already discovered and monitored by the IAEA may have been considered the price of rapprochement, especially if Iranian security goals were attainable without an active weapons program

## **Policy Considerations**

While the Bush administration and hawks in Congress spin the results of the NIE as validation of their hard-line position and containment approach to Iran, their suggestion

that stepped up pressure was the means of producing optimal results with respect to Iran is refutable. Assuming that the NIE conclusions are accurate, Iran dropped its weapons program at a time when diplomacy and limited pressure seemed to be in effect.

If Iran had indeed abandoned its program in 2003, it was during a year in which no new sanctions were imposed against Iran in Congress, and no United Nations Security Council action taken. In contrast, the increased unilateral and multilateral pressure in the form of 2006 and 2007 sanctions have not yet had the intended effect of ending Iran's uranium enrichment activities. In 2003, the IAEA Board of Governors and the more closely US-allied EU-3, rejected US Ambassador Brillier's hard-line position on Iran, and refused to refer the Iranian dossier to the UNSC. Rather than showing success by eliciting a favorable response to hostility, the NIE's version of the Iranian reaction in 2003 could demonstrate a different kind of pragmatism in Tehran and a more favorable response to carrots than sticks.

Finally the White House's presumption that heightened pressure might keep Iran from pursuing a weapons objective today or down the line may also be challenged by the NIE. Page 7 of the document concludes, "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."

By reaffirming that the Iranian leadership is today unlikely to be convinced of foregoing "the eventual development of nuclear weapons," let alone civilian nuclear power, the NIE implies that the current adversarial approach to Iran has not made enough of an impact on Iran's decision-making calculus for the Iranians to change their behavior. Remember, the NIE comes in the wake of the most severe pressure exerted on Iran by US policymakers and the international community to date. Instead the NIE implies that an eventual weapons program is still looming in Iran and possibly inevitable, under the current approach.



