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Iran Probably Already Has the Bomb. Here's What to Do about It

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Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivers a televised speech in Tehran, Iran March 11, 2021. (Official Khamenei Website/Handout via Reuters)

We can start by figuring out how to defend ourselves.

WASHINGTON's policy-makers are being misled by the intelligence and defense communities that are grossly underestimating the nuclear threat from [Iran](#), just as they did with North Korea.

Washington's mainstream "worst-case" thinking assumes Iran does not yet have atomic weapons, but could "break out" to crash-develop one or a few A-bombs in a year, which the intelligence community would supposedly detect in time for warning and preventive measures. Rowan Scarborough [recently reported in the *Washington Times*](#) that "during a private talk in July 2017 before a Japanese-U.S. audience," the Pentagon's director of Net Assessment James H. Baker briefed that "Iran, if it chooses, may 'safely' possess a nuclear weapon in 10-15 years time."

Another mainstream "worst-case" view is that Iran could abide by the Obama administration's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and legitimately glide toward nuclear weapons capability in ten to 15 years. The Trump administration canceled the JCPOA for legitimate reasons, [but the Biden administration has pledged to revive it](#).

In contrast to these views, [we warned in these pages in February 2016](#) that Iran probably already had atomic weapons deliverable by missile and satellite:

We assess, from UN International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] reports and other sources, that Iran probably already has nuclear weapons. . . . prior to 2003, Iran was manufacturing nuclear weapon components, like bridge-wire detonators and neutron initiators, performing non-fissile explosive experiments of an implosion nuclear device, and working on the design of a nuclear warhead for the Shahab-III missile.

When our World War II Manhattan Project reached this stage, the U.S. was only months away from making the first atomic bombs. This was Iran's status 18 years ago. And the Manhattan Project employed 1940s-era technology to invent and use the first atomic weapons in only three years, beginning from a purely theoretical understanding.

So by 2003, Iran was already a threshold nuclear-missile state. But for at least the last decade, the intelligence community has annually assessed that Iran could build atomic weapons in one year or less. On the other hand, less than a month ago, independent analysts at the Institute for Science and International Security assessed that Iran had a [break-out time of as short as three months for its first nuclear weapon and five months for a second](#).

And there is no reason to believe U.S. and IAEA intelligence capabilities are so perfect that they can assuredly detect Iran's clandestine efforts to build atomic weapons. Indeed, the U.S. and IAEA did not even know about Iran's clandestine nuclear-weapons program until Iranian dissidents exposed it in 2002.

The IAEA and the U.S. intelligence community have long been poor nuclear watchdogs. IAEA inspections failed to discover clandestine nuclear-weapons programs in North Korea, Pakistan, Iraq, and Libya. In 1998, the intelligence community's "Worldwide Threat Assessment" failed to warn that, just a few months later, Pakistan and India would overtly "go nuclear" with a series of nuclear-weapons tests. U.S. intelligence often underestimated nuclear threats from Russia, China, and North Korea. It is likely now doing the same with Iran.

Contrary to mainstream thinking:

- *Iran can build sophisticated nuclear weapons by relying on component testing, without nuclear testing.* The U.S., Israel, Pakistan, and India have all used the component-testing approach. The U.S. Hiroshima bomb was not tested, nor have been more sophisticated U.S. thermonuclear warheads during the past 30 years. Pakistan and India's 1998 nuclear tests were done for political reasons, not out of technological necessity.
- *IAEA inspections are limited to civilian sites, and restricted from military bases, including several highly suspicious underground facilities where Iran's nuclear-weapons program almost certainly continues clandestinely.* Imagery of one vast underground site, heavily protected by SAMs, shows high-voltage powerlines terminating underground, potentially delivering enormous amounts of electricity, consistent with powering uranium enrichment centrifuges on an industrial scale. So IAEA reports on Iran's enriched-uranium stockpile almost certainly are not the whole story.
- The U.S. intelligence assessment that Iran suspended its nuclear-weapons program in 2003 is contradicted both by Iran's nuclear archives, stolen by Israel in 2018, indicating Iran's ongoing nuclear-weapons program (reported at several sites in 2006, 2017, and 2019) and by Iran's rapid

resumption of enriching uranium to prohibited levels. This demonstrates an existing capability to quickly produce weapons-grade uranium. [Reports](#) from the Congressional Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Commission elaborate these and important related issues.

- Most estimates assume Iran needs five to ten kilograms of highly enriched (over 90 percent) uranium-235 or plutonium-239 to make an atomic weapon, as with the first crudely designed A-bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But a good design requires only one to two kilograms. Crude A-bombs can be designed with uranium-235 or plutonium-239 enriched to only 50 percent.
- Iran's nuclear and missile programs are not just indigenous, but are helped significantly by Russia, China, North Korea, and probably Pakistan.
- While the intelligence community uses an in-country nuclear test as confirmation that a country, including Iran, has developed a nuclear weapon, this leaves it wide open to deceiving itself, our leadership, and our allies. Iran and North Korea have close working relations, North Korea will do anything for Iranian oil, and Iranians have reportedly been present at some of North Korea's nuclear tests. North Korea could easily have exchanged information with Iran and even tested Iranian nuclear weapons as well as their own — if there is any difference — without the U.S. and its allies knowing whose weapons were being tested. North Korean scientists are known to be in Iran helping the Islamic Revolutionary Guard “space program” that provides cover for developing ICBMs.

As we warned five years ago, it is implausible and imprudent to assume that Iran refrained from making atomic weapons for more than a decade, when they could do so clandestinely:

Iran probably has nuclear warheads for the Shahab-III medium-range missile, which they tested for making EMP attacks. . . . And at a time of its choosing, Iran could launch a surprise EMP attack against the United States by satellite, as they have apparently practiced with help from North Korea.

Why has Iran not gone overtly nuclear, like North Korea? There are several explanations. For one, North Korea is protected by China and lives in a safer neighborhood, where South Korea and Japan are reluctant to support U.S. military options to disarm Pyongyang. In contrast, Iran's neighbors, Israel and moderate Arab states, are far more likely to support air strikes to disarm Tehran. As we warned five years ago, Iran probably wants to build enough nuclear missiles to make its capabilities irreversible:

Iran could be building a nuclear-capable missile force, partly hidden in tunnels, as suggested by its revelation of a vast underground missile basing system. . . . Iran is building toward a large, deployable, survivable, war-fighting missile force—to which nuclear weapons can be swiftly added as they are manufactured.

Moreover, Iran wants to preserve the fiction of its non-nuclear status. It has derived far more economic and strategic benefits from the JCPOA and threats to “go nuclear” than has North Korea from “going nuclear” overtly. Ominously, Iran may be forgoing the deterrence benefits of an overt nuclear posture because it is building toward surprise future employment of nuclear capabilities to advance the global theological agenda of the ayatollahs and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, the world's largest and most sophisticated terrorist organization.

So what can we do to meet this almost-certain threat? Some better options are, unfortunately, far more difficult at this juncture. Arms control non-solutions like the JCPOA will only make matters worse, just as arms control did with North Korea, by offering false hope while the nuclear threat grows. Disarming Iran

of nuclear capabilities by airstrikes or invasion would be very risky since we do not know where all of its nuclear missiles are hidden. The U.S. was deterred from disarming North Korea when that nation's nuclear-missile capabilities were merely nascent. Regime change by sponsoring a popular revolution may be a practical solution — the Iranian people would overthrow their Islamist government if they could. But the regime itself has proven adept at suppressing popular uprisings, and may use U.S. involvement, whether purported or actual, as a propaganda tool in such an effort, as it has before.

But there are things we can do right now, including:

- Harden U.S. electric grids and other life-sustaining critical infrastructures against a nuclear EMP attack, which is described in Iran's military doctrine and would be the regime's most easily executed and most damaging nuclear threat.
- The White House and STRATCOM should regard Iran as a nuclear-missile threat right now, increase scrutiny by national technical means of verification and by human intelligence to locate nuclear-weapons capabilities, and prepare preemptive options should action become necessary.
- Strengthen National Missile Defenses and especially deploy modern space-based defenses. For example, the 1990s Brilliant Pebbles project, canceled by the Clinton administration, could begin deployment in five years, cost an estimated \$20 billion in today's dollars, and intercept essentially all ballistic missiles ranging more than a few-hundred miles, including from Russia and China. Our national survival should not depend only upon striking first or deterrence. The American people would rather be defended than avenged.

Ambassador R. James Woolsey is a former director of central intelligence; William R. Graham was President Reagan's science adviser and acting administrator of NASA, and chaired the Congressional EMP Commission; Ambassador Henry F. Cooper was director of the Strategic Defense Initiative and chief negotiator at the Defense and Space Talks with the USSR; Fritz Ermarth was chairman of the National Intelligence Council; Peter Vincent Pry is executive director of the EMP Task Force on National and Homeland Security and served in the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission, the House Armed Services Committee, and the CIA.