

In Iran We Trust?

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ON Monday the United States intelligence community issued what everyone agrees was blockbuster news: a report stating that in the autumn of 2003, Iran halted its nuclear weapons program. The National Intelligence Estimate has been heralded as a courageous act of independence by the intelligence agencies, and praised by both parties for showing a higher quality of spy work than earlier assessments.

In fact, the report contains the same sorts of flaws that we have learned to expect from our intelligence agency offerings. It, like the report in 2002 that set up the invasion of Iraq, is both misleading and dangerous.

During the past year, a period when Iran's weapons program was supposedly halted, the government has been busy installing some 3,000 gas centrifuges at its plant at Natanz. These machines could, if operated continuously for about a year, create enough enriched uranium to provide fuel for a bomb. In addition, they have no plausible purpose in Iran's civilian nuclear effort. All of Iran's needs for enriched uranium for its energy programs are covered by a contract with Russia.

Iran is also building a heavy water reactor at its research center at Arak. This reactor is ideal for producing plutonium for nuclear bombs, but is of little use in an energy program like Iran's, which does not use plutonium for reactor fuel. India, Israel and Pakistan have all built similar reactors — all with the purpose of fueling nuclear weapons. And why, by the way, does Iran even want a nuclear energy program, when it is sitting on an enormous pool of oil that is now skyrocketing in value? And why is Iran developing long-range Shahab missiles, which make no military sense without nuclear warheads to put on them?

For years these expensive projects have been viewed as evidence of Iran's commitment to nuclear weapons. Why aren't they still? The answer is that the new report defines "nuclear weapons program" in a ludicrously narrow way: it confines it to enriching uranium at secret sites or working on a nuclear weapon design. But the halting of its secret enrichment and weapon design efforts in 2003 proves only that Iran made a tactical move. It suspended work that, if discovered, would unambiguously reveal intent to build a weapon. It has continued other work, crucial to the ability to make a bomb, that it can pass off as having civilian applications.

That work includes the centrifuges at Natanz, which bring Iran closer to a nuclear weapon every day — two to seven years away. To assert, as the report does, that these centrifuges are "civilian," and not part of Iran's weapons threat, is grossly misleading.

The new report has also upended our sanctions policy, which was just beginning to produce results. Banks and energy companies were pulling back from Iran. The United Nations Security Council had frozen the assets of dozens of Iranian companies. That policy now seems dead. If Iran is not going for the bomb, why punish it?

No company or bank will agree to lose money unless a nuclear threat is clear. Likewise, is it fair for the United Nations to continue to freeze the assets of people like Seyed Jaber Safdari, the manager of the Natanz plant, or companies like Mesbah Energy, the supplier of the reactor at Arak, because of links to a program that American intelligence believes is benign? One European official admitted to us that he and his colleagues were flummoxed. "We have to have a new policy now for going forward," he said, "but we haven't been able to figure out what it is."

This situation is made all the more absurd by the report's suggestion that international pressure offers the only hope of containing Iran. The report has now made such pressure nearly impossible to obtain. It is hardly surprising that China, which last week seemed ready to approve the next round of economic sanctions against Tehran, has now had a change of heart: its ambassador to the United Nations said yesterday that "we all start from the presumption that now things have changed."

We should be suspicious of any document that suddenly gives the Bush administration a pass on a big national security problem it won't solve during its remaining year in office. Is the administration just washing its hands of the intractable Iranian nuclear issue by saying, "If we can't fix it, it ain't broke"?

In any case, the report is an undoubted victory for Iran. Even if it opens the way for direct talks, which would be a benefit, it validates Iran's claim that efforts to shut down Natanz are illegitimate. Thus Iran will be free to operate and add

to its centrifuges at Natanz, accumulate a stockpile of low-enriched uranium customary for civilian use, and then have the ability to convert that uranium in a matter of months to weapons grade. This "breakout potential" would create a nuclear threat that we and Iran's neighbors will have to live with for years to come.

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