

## In about turn, U.S. says Iran may be able to make nukes by 2009

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Intelligence official revives Iran doubts

Iranian nuclear rewrite  
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### REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Give Admiral Michael McConnell credit for trying to walk back the cat. Questioned this week by the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Director of National Intelligence defended the "integrity and the professionalism" of the process that produced last December's stunning National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear program. Yet his testimony amounts to a reversal of the previous judgment.

The December NIE made headlines the world over for its "key judgment" that in 2003 "Tehran halted its nuclear weapons programs" -- programs that previously had been conducted in secret and in violation of Iran's Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligations.

This was a "high confidence" judgment, though the intelligence community had only "moderate confidence" that the program hasn't since been restarted. The NIE also waded into speculative political and policy judgments, such as that "Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs."

So it was little wonder that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad quickly called the NIE a "declaration of victory" for Iran's nuclear programs. Diplomatic efforts to pass a third round of U.N. economic sanctions ground to a crawl, though another weak draft resolution is currently making the rounds. Russia decided to ship nuclear fuel to the reactor it has built for Iran at Bushehr, a move it had previously postponed for months and which has worrisome proliferation risks.

Elsewhere, the NIE complicated U.S. efforts to deploy an antiballistic-missile shield in Central Europe. The Israelis worried that the report signaled the death of American seriousness on Iran, possibly requiring them to act alone. At home, Democrats used the NIE to accuse the Administration of hyping intelligence. "It's absolutely clear and eerily similar to what we saw with Iraq," said John Edwards.

Now Admiral McConnell is clearly trying to repair the damage, even if he can't say so directly. "I think I would change the way that we described [the] nuclear program," he admitted to Evan Bayh (D., Ind.) during the hearing, adding that weapon design and weaponization were "the least significant portion" of a nuclear weapons program.

He expressed some regret that the authors of the NIE had left it to a footnote to explain that the NIE's definition of "nuclear weapons program" meant only its design and weaponization and excluded its uranium enrichment. And he agreed with Mr. Bayh's statement that it would be "very difficult" for the U.S. to know if Iran had recommenced weaponization work, and that "given their industrial and technological capabilities, they are likely to be successful" in building a bomb.

The Admiral went even further in his written statement. Gone is the NIE's palaver about the cost-benefit approach or the sticks-and-carrots by which the mullahs may be induced to behave. Instead, the new assessment stresses that Iran continues to press ahead on enrichment, "the most difficult challenge in nuclear production." It notes that "Iran's efforts to perfect ballistic missiles that can reach North Africa and Europe also continue" -- a key component of a nuclear weapons capability.

Then there is the other side of WMD: "We assess that Tehran maintains dual-use facilities intended to produce CW [Chemical Warfare] agent in times of need and conducts research that may have offensive applications." Ditto for biological weapons, where "Iran has previously conducted offensive BW agent research and development," and "continues to seek dual-use technologies that could be used for biological warfare."

All this merely confirms what has long been obvious about Iran's intentions. No less importantly, his testimony underscores the extent to which the first NIE was at best a PR fiasco, at worst a revolt by intelligence analysts seeking to

undermine current U.S. policy. As we reported at the time, the NIE was largely the work of State Department alumni with track records as "hyperpartisan anti-Bush officials," according to an intelligence source. They did their job too well. As Senator Bayh pointed out at the hearing, the NIE "had unintended consequences that, in my own view, are damaging to the national security interests of our country." Mr. Bayh is not a neocon.

Admiral McConnell's belated damage repair ought to refocus world attention on Iran's very real nuclear threat. Too bad his NIE rewrite won't get anywhere near the media attention that the first draft did.

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 Intelligence official revives Iran doubts  
 By Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington

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The senior US intelligence official on Tuesday stressed that a recent report on Iran had concluded that Tehran had halted only one part of its alleged nuclear weapons programme.

Admiral Michael McConnell, director of national intelligence, said the November national intelligence estimate had concluded that Tehran had ceased only efforts to covertly enrich uranium and design nuclear warheads. "The only thing that they've halted was nuclear weapons design, which is probably the least significant part of the programme," he told the Senate intelligence committee.

Adm McConnell said Iran continued to develop uranium enrichment technology and longer-range ballistic missiles.

Critics of the US administration's approach on Iran had seized on the NIE as evidence that the US had exaggerated the threat. In response, Robert Gates, defence secretary, gave a tough speech on Iran a few days later, stressing that the report had confirmed for the first time that Tehran had established a nuclear weapons programme.

A spokesman for Adm McConnell said on Tuesday he was not backing away from the NIE's conclusions but simply concerned that there had been too much focus on one element of the report.

Adm McConnell was giving Congress his annual assessment of threats to the US. He also raised concerns about North Korea's nuclear activities.

"While Pyongyang denies a programme for uranium enrichment, and they deny their proliferation activities, we believe North Korea -continues to engage in both," he said.

The US is trying to convince Pyongyang to provide a full declaration of its nuclear activities as part of a deal reached in six-party talks aimed at denuclearising the Korean peninsula. North Korea has already missed the deadline of the end of last year to provide the declaration.

Adm McConnell expressed concern about the increased ability of al-Qaeda to operate in the border area of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and said the organisation was improving its ability to attack the US.

He also raised concerns about a growing influx of "western recruits" into the tribal areas of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border since mid-2006.

At the same hearing, General Michael Hayden, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, confirmed publicly for the first time that the US had used the interrogation technique of waterboarding - or simulated drowning - on three detainees captured since the 9/11 attacks.

Gen Hayden said the CIA used the technique on Khaled Sheik Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the attacks, and two other detainees. He said the CIA had not used waterboarding for almost five years.  
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<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a1ce672e-d456-11dc-a8c6-0000779fd2ac.html>

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 In about turn, U.S. says Iran may be able to make nukes by 2009  
 By Amir Oren, Haaretz Correspondent, and Haaretz Service

The head of American intelligence said Tuesday that it is unclear whether Tehran has returned to its production of nuclear weapons in the past six months, and warned that Iran "would be technically capable of producing enough highly

enriched uranium for a weapon" by the end of next year.

Speaking two months after an American intelligence report cast doubt on Tehran's nuclear ambitions, National Intelligence Director John Michael McConnell made his remarks during an appearance before the Senate Intelligence Committee to present an annual report on threats to the U.S.

A National Intelligence Estimate report released in December said that Iran halted its nuclear weapons development program in the fall of 2003.

"We remain concerned about Iran's intentions and assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons," the report said.

"We assess with high confidence that Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons," it said, adding that the only realistic way to prevent Iran from producing such weapons was "an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective."

McConnell expressed skepticism at the ability of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah movement to deliver security for Israel and to overcome Hamas' efforts to stymie the political process.

He said that despite pressures on Hamas, "the group remains fairly unified, especially its military wing, and in charge in the Gaza Strip where it controls all PA facilities. Hamas continues to curtail freedoms and to harass Fatah members."

McConnell said however, that the U.S. recognizes signs of Fatah's progress in the West Bank, praising "renewed security and law enforcement cooperation with Israeli forces in taking more effective action against Hamas."

There was no mention in the report of the Israel Air Force attack on Syria in September 2007, which foreign news sources have speculated was a strike on a nuclear facility built with North Korean assistance. He said, however, that North Korea, which has sold ballistic missiles to Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, could "proliferate nuclear weapons abroad."

The intelligence chief also estimated that Iran and Syria will boost their support for Hezbollah, Hamas and other Palestinian terror organizations. He accused Syria and Hezbollah of interfering with the Lebanese presidential elections.

He warned that rising tensions in Lebanon could result in a fresh civil war, and the return to armed "militias" within the country.

"Many former militias in Lebanon are reconstituting, rearming, and retraining their fighters," he said. "The increased political and sectarian tension also raises the potential for civil war within the country."

In addition, McConnell raised the threat of Al-Qaida in Lebanon, maintaining it continues to threaten the country's internal security.

-----Intelligence Chief Reshapes Iran NIE  
February 06, 2008 02:07 PM ET - US News and World Report

This week's Annual Threat Assessment appearance on Capitol Hill by Mike McConnell, the director of national intelligence, seemed to stand in contrast to two months ago, when the public version of a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran blew up a policy storm with its conclusion—in spite of heated rhetoric to the contrary—that Iran had halted its work on how to design and build a nuclear warhead way back in 2003.

It was as though the lyrics were much the same as in the recent past, but the tone of the music had darkened noticeably.

The initial release of the NIE created a huge political and diplomatic problem for the Bush administration just as it was attempting to galvanize international support for an additional round of U.N. economic sanctions against Iran. In Washington, it was pilloried by hard-liners—some in and some outside the administration—and slammed by a variety of former nonproliferation and intelligence officials as misleading and badly constructed.

So last week, when McConnell got to the Iran file, the NIE's findings seemed to be repackaged in a way that emphasized a sense of undiminished threat and suspicion of Iran's long-term nuclear ambitions. McConnell stressed what many critics said the December NIE should have—that Iran, albeit under international monitoring, continues to move forward on the single most important part of attaining a nuclear-weapons capability: learning how to enrich uranium. The intel chief also focused on Tehran's efforts to perfect and deploy ballistic missiles that would be able to reach North Africa and Europe.

McConnell suggested that Iran "is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons." And for those who—to the administration's dismay—found solace in the NIE's conclusion on Iran's halt to weaponization efforts, he offered this warning: "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."

Whoever thought the NIE was the final word on the subject appears to have been wrong.

—Thomas Omestad