



# Is Iran developing a nuclear weapon?

Standard Note: SNIA 6222

Last updated: 15 February 2012

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

---

Iran's nuclear programme remains at the top of the international agenda. Many commentators think that Iran is not made a decision to build a nuclear weapon, but that Iran may want to be at the threshold, with the technical ability and materials to build a weapon fairly quickly if the decision was made.

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Iranian government statements on nuclear weapons</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>IAEA position</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>US intelligence</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Israel</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>UK government</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Assessments</b>	<b>5</b>

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

## 1 Iranian government statements on nuclear weapons

The Iranian government says that it is not aiming to develop nuclear weapons. In fact, in a statement to the IAEA meeting in Vienna in 2005, the Iranian chief nuclear negotiator Sirus Naseri said that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had declared nuclear weapons to be forbidden under Islam:

The Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued the fatwa that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam and that the Islamic Republic of Iran shall never acquire these weapons. President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who took office just recently, in his inaugural address, reiterated that his government is against weapons of mass destruction and will only pursue nuclear activities in the peaceful domain.<sup>1</sup>

Many regime figures reiterated the prohibition on nuclear weapons, including Khamenei himself who, in 2010, said:

Iran will not get emotional in its response to these nonsensical statements, because we have often said that our religious tenets and beliefs consider these kinds of weapons of mass destruction to be symbols of genocide and are, therefore, forbidden and considered to be haraam [forbidden in Islam]. This is why we do not believe in atomic bombs and weapons and do not seek them.<sup>2</sup>

There have, however, been reports that members of the Iranian religious establishment were weakening the prohibition on nuclear weapons. In 2006, Mohsen Gharavian was reported to have said:

When the entire world is armed with nuclear weapons, it is permissible to use these weapons as a counter-measure. According to Sharia too, only the goal is important."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, US commentator on international relations Fareed Zakaria concludes that Iran may not want nuclear weapons, especially given their many assertions that they are forbidden in Islam:

Now, of course, they could all be lying. But it seems odd for a regime that derives its legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic if it intends to develop them. It would be far shrewder to stop reminding people of Khomeini's statements and stop issuing new fatwas against nukes.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, two articles for the Washington Institute for near East Policy conclude that Ayatollah Khomeini established the survival of the Islamic republic as a supreme religious value. With hardliners increasingly dominant in the Iranian regime and the rise of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its doctrines of resistance, the authors conclude that the regime's assurances that it does not seek nuclear weapons would not stop their acquisition if it was thought necessary to preserve the regime:

... fatwas are issued in response to specific circumstances and can be altered in response to changing conditions. Ayatollah Khomeini modified his position on a

---

<sup>1</sup> "Iran's Statement at IAEA Emergency Meeting", *Mehr News Agency*, 10 August 2005

<sup>2</sup> "Iran's supreme leader: We do not seek atomic bombs", *CNN*, 19 February 2010

<sup>3</sup> "Iranian fatwa approves use of nuclear weapons", *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2006

<sup>4</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "They May Not Want The Bomb", *Newsweek*, 22 May 2009

number of issues during his lifetime—for instance, on taxes, military conscription, women's suffrage, and monarchy as a form of government. Thus nothing would prevent Khamenei from modifying or supplanting his nuclear fatwa should circumstances dictate a change in policy.<sup>5</sup>

The Iranian fatwa against nuclear weapons, then, probably provides some assurance that Iran will not develop a bomb but not an absolute guarantee.

## 2 IAEA position

The International Atomic Energy Agency said in its 8 November 2011 report that it was not sure that Iran was not working on a weapon:

While the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at the nuclear facilities and LOFs declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement, as Iran is not providing the necessary cooperation, including by not implementing its Additional Protocol, the Agency is unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities.<sup>6</sup>

It also drew attention to activities that could indicate a possible military dimension to the Iranian nuclear programme:

The information indicates that Iran has carried out the following activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device:

- Efforts, some successful, to procure nuclear related and dual use equipment and materials by military related individuals and entities;
- Efforts to develop undeclared pathways for the production of nuclear material;
- The acquisition of nuclear weapons development information and documentation from a clandestine nuclear supply network; and
- Work on the development of an indigenous design of a nuclear weapon including the testing of components.<sup>7</sup>

The IAEA went on to give a lot more detail about the potentially suspicious activities in an annex to the report.

However, most of the activities mentioned in the report took place before 2003 and although the IAEA report highlighted suspicious activities more than previous reports had done, it contained no firm evidence that Iran is developing a weapon.

## 3 US intelligence

A US National Intelligence Estimate of 2007 suggested that the Iranian authorities had made a decision in 2003 to halt the weapons programme:

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2011

<sup>6</sup> *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, IAEA, 8 November 2011, p10

<sup>7</sup> *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, IAEA, 8 November 2011, p8

We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. We judge with high confidence that the halt, and Tehran's announcement of its decision to suspend its declared uranium enrichment program and sign an Additional Protocol to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement, was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work.

- We assess with high confidence that until fall 2003, Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons.
- We judge with high confidence that the halt lasted at least several years. (Because of intelligence gaps discussed elsewhere in this Estimate, however, DOE and the NIC assess with only moderate confidence that the halt to those activities represents a halt to Iran's entire nuclear weapons program.)
- We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.
- We continue to assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Iran does not currently have a nuclear weapon.
- Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005. Our assessment that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously.<sup>8</sup>

According to the evidence of the US Director of National Intelligence to the US Senate Intelligence Committee in 2012, Iran's nuclear programme is one of the major concerns to the US. He echoed the judgment of his predecessors that it was not known if Iran would decide to go ahead and build a nuclear weapon:

We assess that Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup>

He went on to say that, should it make that decision, Iran has the technical capacity to achieve a nuclear weapons capability:

Iran's technical advancement, particularly in uranium enrichment, strengthens our assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> [National Intelligence Estimate, Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities](#), National Intelligence Council, November 2007

<sup>9</sup> James Clapper, *Unclassified statement for the record on the worldwide threat assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Intelligence*, Director of National Intelligence, 31 January 2012

<sup>10</sup> James Clapper, *Unclassified statement for the record on the worldwide threat assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Intelligence*, Director of National Intelligence, 31 January 2012

## 4 Israel

A difference of opinion has been evident in Israel in the last few months as to the wisdom and feasibility of launching an attack soon on Iran's nuclear programme. Many in the defence and intelligence establishments are reported to be against an attack, while the Prime Minister and his Defence Minister are said to be more in favour. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister is not reported to have made a decision yet.

In an interview during his 2011 visit to the United States, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was asked under what circumstances he would think that Israel would be forced to do something. He first said: "Iran is developing a program for nuclear weapons," perhaps suggesting that Israel accepts that Iran wants only to develop a nuclear capability rather than go ahead and build a weapon. Then, a moment later, he said: "Of course he's developing nuclear weapons, and the means to delivering them."<sup>11</sup>

However, whether Iran has made the decision to build a weapon or not may be immaterial to the Israelis. The Israeli fear is that Iran may be close to having enough highly-enriched uranium to be able to act on any decision to build a weapon and that the stockpiles and other facilities are well enough protected for it to be getting difficult for Israeli firepower alone to destroy them. Israeli officials are aware that the Obama administration does not favour a military strike at present and Israel wants to be able to rely on its own resources. For the Israelis, then, it is more about whether there is a window of opportunity to delay the programme by acting soon, rather than whether there has been an Iranian decision to build a weapon.

## 5 UK government

The UK government set out its position in a PQ answered in February 2012, saying that Iran was getting itself to a position where it could quite easily produce a weapon, should it choose to do so:

Iran already has certain capabilities in the nuclear field, most notably the capability to enrich uranium. As the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) most recent report on the Iranian nuclear programme makes clear, Iran has conducted activities relevant, and in some cases specific, to the development of nuclear weapons. Iran continues to expand its stockpile of near-20% enriched uranium. Its continuing production of this material—in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolutions—brings it closer to the day when it will have sufficient stocks to further enrich this material to weapons-grade and produce a nuclear device, should it so choose. This causes us grave concern about the ultimate purpose of the Iranian nuclear programme. The example of the Qom uranium enrichment facility, which Iran initially kept secret from the IAEA, also raises our concerns that there may also be other, undeclared sites in Iran that could be engaged in work designed to shorten this timeline further. This is why it is important for Iran to allow the IAEA the access it requires to address the international community's concerns on these and other issues, as the UN Security Council has instructed it to do.<sup>12</sup>

## 6 Assessments

Most analyses concur that Iran has not decided to build a weapon, but that the regime wants to develop the capability to be able to move quickly to building a weapon should such a

---

<sup>11</sup> "Interview with Benjamin Netanyahu", *Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, 26 September 2011

<sup>12</sup> HC Deb 7 February 2012, c174W

decision be made. In a paper for the Rand Corporation, a think tank, the authors say that it can be assumed that Iran will acquire that threshold capability within the decade:

It is not inevitable that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons or that it will gain the capacity to quickly produce them. American and even Israeli analysts continually push their estimates for such an event further into the future. Nevertheless, absent a change in Iranian policy, it is reasonable to assume that, some time in the coming decade, Iran will acquire such a capability.<sup>13</sup>

However, the authors go on to argue that the world's reaction to a nuclear-armed Iran could have important negative impact on the interests of the regime, and that this may mean that stopping at the threshold could be the most beneficial position for Iran:

The regime is also susceptible to international pressure, especially sanctions. It is unlikely to weaponize its nuclear program if it thinks that doing so would undermine the regime's longevity. A demonstrated or declared capability would further alienate Iran from its neighbours and the international community, including close commercial partners, such as China. In addition, openly abandoning the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) could invite a U.S. or Israeli military strike and encourage acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran's Arab neighbours. For these reasons, a virtual nuclear capability in which Iran maintains the ability to create weapons might best suit the regime's interests.<sup>14</sup>

In a note for RUSI in November 2011, Malcolm Chalmers and Andrea Berger also concluded that Iran was heading towards having the option of making a bomb, rather than straight for a bomb. They point out the advantage to Iran of the threshold position: that it removes the legal basis for a military strike:

The International Atomic Energy Agency's latest report on Iran describes in unprecedented detail a country moving slowly towards a nuclear weapons option, rather than a bomb itself. This lack of a 'smoking gun' removes military response from the international community's toolbox of policy options. But this is no grounds for complacency.<sup>15</sup>

George Friedman, for Stratfor, echoes this point and says that Iran is a long way from having a useful nuclear weapons capability, even if it decided to have one:

As we have said for several years, we do not see Iran as close to having a nuclear weapon. They may be close to being able to test a crude nuclear device under controlled circumstances (and we don't know this either), but the development of a deliverable nuclear weapon poses major challenges for Iran.

Moreover, while the Iranians may aspire to a deterrent via a viable nuclear weapons capability, we do not believe the Iranians see nuclear weapons as militarily useful. A few such weapons could devastate Israel, but Iran would be annihilated in retaliation. While the Iranians talk aggressively, historically they have acted cautiously. For Iran, nuclear weapons are far more valuable as a notional threat and bargaining chip than as something to be deployed. Indeed, the ideal situation is not quite having a weapon,

---

<sup>13</sup> James Dobbins, Alireza nader, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Fredric Wehrey, *Coping with a nuclearising Iran*, RAND Corporation, 2011, p101

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p27

<sup>15</sup> "Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: A Steady Crawl to Breakout Capability", Royal United Services Institute, 14 November 2011

and therefore not forcing anyone to act against them, but seeming close enough to be taken seriously. They certainly have achieved that.<sup>16</sup>

Shashank Joshi for RUSI writes that Iran would be unlikely to make a decision to weaponise unless the regime was threatened:

Possessing the option of acquiring the bomb, rather than actually doing so, has been called 'nuclear hedging, 'nuclear latency, or the 'Japan option'. This is likely a more desirable path for Iran. The precedents for overt nuclearisation - in other words, the benefits from going nuclear - are mixed: Pyongyang has undoubtedly acquired a robust deterrent, but also labours under a severe sanctions regime. India, which tested its weapons in 1998 after a long period of nuclear latency, was eventually given special exemptions from sanctions; Iran would not receive such treatment. Unless the regime's very survival was in serious doubt, it is difficult to see what Iran would gain from actually building or testing a bomb. It would gain prestige, and some deterrent value, from simply possessing the technical means - 'the art rather than the article', as Churchill put it in 1951.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the widespread consensus that Iran has not made a decision to acquire a weapon, many analysts are working on the assumption that it could in future make that decision and that it could be successful. With military action not thought able to end the nuclear programme permanently, several commentators conclude that it is sensible to consider what a policy of containment or deterrence of a nuclear-armed Iran might look like.

A paper for the American Enterprise Institute, for example, sets out these arguments:

While it is possible military action will deprive Iran of its nuclear option, that the current regime in the Islamic Republic will be overthrown, or that sanctions will bring the regime to the table with meaningful concessions, there is also every possibility that none of these scenarios will come to pass. Moreover, if there is a rising consensus that sanctions will ultimately fail, there is an equally strong belief in the foreign policy establishments of Washington and other Western capitals that pre-emptive military action is unappealing, leading many to suggest that containing a nuclear Iran is a reasonable option.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> George Friedman, "[Considering a US-Iranian Deal](#)", *Stratfor*, 24 January 2012

<sup>17</sup> Shashank Joshi, "[Iran and the West Playing a Zero-Sum Game](#)", Royal United Services Institute, January 2012

<sup>18</sup> Danielle Pletka, Thomas Donnelly, Maseh Zarif, "[Containing and Deterring a Nuclear Iran: Questions for Strategy, Requirements for Military Forces](#)", AEI, January 18, 2012