

## **Distorting Intelligence to Sell the Iran Nuclear Deal**

Though the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) was sold as a means of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon, in fact it is only intended to delay Iran's acquisition of such weapons. Ten years after the deal takes effect, Iran will be allowed to install many advanced centrifuges. As a result the time that would be needed for Iran to produce the Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) required for a nuclear weapon (the breakout time) will become much less than the one year that is the objective of the JCPOA. Fifteen years after the deal takes effect, Iran will be allowed to stockpile large quantities of enriched uranium and the breakout time will become less than one week.

The Obama Administration has claimed that in fifteen years it will be much easier for some future Administration to take military action to stop an Iranian nuclear weapon due to the insight into Iran's nuclear infrastructure provided by the JCPOA. However, with a breakout time of less than one week, the U.S. will likely not be able to even detect a breakout let alone take action to prevent it before Iran has acquired nuclear weapons.

In order to try to justify the JCPOA, the Obama Administration has completely reversed its estimate of when the Iranian nuclear program, absent the JCPOA, might be able to produce a nuclear weapon. Only a few years ago U.S. intelligence was implausibly claiming that Iran was simply "keeping open the option."<sup>2</sup> In the words of one administration official "They're keeping the soup warm but they are not cooking it."<sup>3</sup> U.S. intelligence stated that Iran had not yet decided whether it wanted to acquire nuclear weapons, implying that it did not even have a nuclear weapons program. If Iran did acquire nuclear weapons it would only occur "eventually."<sup>4</sup> The Administration repeatedly stated that Iran was more than a year away from being able to acquire a nuclear weapon.

This view of a static Iranian nuclear program ignored Iran's steady expansion of its centrifuge enrichment program as well as its slow but steady efforts to build a plutonium production reactor (termed a research reactor) at Arak. By 2013 independent analysts such as myself calculated that Iran's growing centrifuge enrichment facilities and enriched uranium stockpiles provided it with a breakout time of only two months, though U.S. intelligence was silent on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the product of the author's personal research and the analysis and views contained in it are solely his responsibility. Though the author is also a part-time adjunct staff member at the RAND Corporation, this paper is not related to any RAND project and therefore RAND should not be mentioned in relation to this paper. I can be reached at [GregJones@proliferationmatters.com](mailto:GregJones@proliferationmatters.com)

<sup>2</sup> James R. Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Committee on Armed Services," February 12, 2012, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Tabassum Zakaria and Mark Hosenball, "Special Report: Intel shows Iran nuclear threat not imminent." Reuters, March 23, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The Cambridge English Dictionary defines eventually as "in the end, especially after a long time, or a lot of effort, problems etc."

However, by 2015, the JCPOA was being negotiated with the objective of keeping the Iranian breakout time to at least one year. However if Iran was already at least one year away from a nuclear weapon, what would the JCPOA accomplish? In order to try to justify the JCPOA the Administration dramatically reversed its assessment of when Iran might acquire nuclear weapons. On April 1, 2015, the day before the outline of the JCPOA was released at Lucerne, the U.S. suddenly declassified the U.S. intelligence estimate that Iran's breakout time was only two months and that it had held this estimate for years.<sup>5</sup>

The Administration rhetoric on the Iranian nuclear threat has completely changed. President Obama recently said that without the JCPOA Iran might move to develop nuclear weapons just six months from now<sup>6</sup>. How is such a statement consistent with an Iran that has made no decision as to whether it even wants a nuclear weapon? Taken at face value the President's statement would seem to imply a dramatic growth in the Iranian nuclear threat during the course of the nuclear negotiations. However, it is clear that it was not Iran that changed but rather the Administration and the way it portrays the Iran nuclear threat.

Though Iran has dramatically shortened its breakout time, even without the JCPOA there was little danger that Iran would actually acquire a nuclear arsenal anytime soon.<sup>7</sup> Iran would want to continue to improve its centrifuge enrichment facilities and enlarge its enriched uranium stockpile so that when it did breakout, it could produce a large number (ten or more) nuclear weapons in less than one month.<sup>8</sup> Thus the U.S. would be presented with a fait accompli that would make it difficult for the U.S. to take any military counteraction without risking a nuclear war. It would have taken Iran many years before it would have been able to achieve this goal.

The issue of how many nuclear weapons Iran could produce from its enriched uranium stockpile if it were to breakout, is one of the clearest examples of how the Obama Administration has distorted the facts about Iran's nuclear program to try to justify the JCPOA. In any breakout Iran would try to produce the HEU for a nuclear weapon as quickly as possible. Iran's current centrifuge plants are configured to produce low enriched uranium (LEU), not HEU. However, one reason why centrifuge enrichment is dangerous is that it is possible to run LEU through the enrichment plant multiple times (batch recycling) to quickly produce HEU. This process uses the stockpiled uranium inefficiently and I estimated that in 2013, Iran would be able to only produce enough HEU for three nuclear weapons using its then current stockpile of LEU. This number would grow by about one weapon per year given Iran's then current enrichment capacity.

Yet Secretary Kerry has recently claimed that in 2013 Iran had sufficient LEU to produce "ten to twelve" nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup> To produce this number of nuclear weapons from Iran's 2013 LEU stockpile would require the use of an enrichment facility that was optimally configured to carry out this enrichment. However Iran does not have and has never had such an enrichment facility.

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<sup>5</sup> Eli Lake, "Obama Kept Iran's Short Breakout Time a Secret," BloombergView, April 21, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Full text: Obama gives a speech about the Iran nuclear deal," Washington Post, August 5, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Jones, "No More Hypotheticals: Iran is Already a Nuclear State," National Review Online, September 9, 2011. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/environment-and-energy/94715/jones-nuclear-iran-ahmadinejad>

<sup>8</sup> This would require Iran to increase its enrichment capacity by at least ten-fold.

<sup>9</sup> "Secretary Kerry on Nuclear Agreement with Iran," IIP Digital, U.S. Department of State, Texts and Transcripts, September 2, 2015.

Iran could reconfigure its centrifuge enrichment facilities so as to carry out the conversion of LEU to HEU in an optimal fashion. However, such a reconfiguration would require many months and it is not something Iran would do if it were trying to breakout quickly.

The Administration's change in position was so abrupt that even U.S. intelligence was caught flat-footed. As recently as the end of February 2015, just five weeks before the outline of the JCPOA was announced at Lucerne, the Director of National Intelligence's threat assessment characterized Iran as "Preserving Nuclear Weapons Option." This assessment repeated what had been its position for years--that any Iranian decision to build a nuclear weapon might only occur "eventually."<sup>10</sup>

Even so Secretary Kerry has tried to have his cake and eat it too. After agreeing that in 2013 Iran had achieved a breakout time of just two months, he went on to say "...though it would take significantly longer to actually build the bomb itself using that fissile material..."<sup>11</sup> This admission shows that even without the JCPOA, Secretary Kerry believes that there is not a threat of an immediate Iranian nuclear weapon and undercuts the rationale for the JCPOA.

Twisting intelligence to serve political ends is hardly new. That the Administration has felt the need to do so highlights the weakness of the JCPOA. It also tends to undermine the credibility of U.S. intelligence in general. At the same time, since even without the JCPOA, Iran will not be able to quickly deploy a large nuclear arsenal, the JCPOA buys little at the expense of seriously damaging overall U.S. nonproliferation policy. By legitimizing Iran's illicit centrifuge enrichment program and granting Iran the right to reprocess spent fuel to recover plutonium, the JCPOA opens an easy path for Iran or any country to acquire the nuclear material required for nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James R. Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," February 26, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> "Secretary Kerry on Nuclear Agreement with Iran," IIP Digital, U.S. Department of State, Texts and Transcripts, September 2, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion see: Gregory S. Jones, An Iran Nuclear Deal That Spreads Nuclear Weapons, August 10, 2015

<http://nebula.wsimg.com/de41a0d1cf9f9c51df7637d3b8df3d05?AccessKeyId=40C80D0B51471CD86975&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>