

IRAN AND THE BOMB

How real is the nuclear threat?

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

Is Iran actively trying to develop nuclear weapons? Members of the Obama Administration often talk as if this were a foregone conclusion, as did their predecessors under George W. Bush. There is a large body of evidence, however, including some of America's most highly classified intelligence assessments, suggesting that the United States could be in danger of repeating a mistake similar to the one made with Saddam Hussein's Iraq eight years ago—allowing anxieties about the policies of a tyrannical regime to distort our estimations of the state's military capacities and intentions. The two most recent National Intelligence Estimates (N.I.E.s) on Iranian nuclear progress, representing the best judgment of the senior officers from all the major American intelligence agencies, have stated that there is no conclusive evidence that Iran has made any effort to build the bomb since 2003.

Despite years of covert operations inside Iran, extensive satellite imagery, and the recruitment of many Iranian intelligence assets, the United States and its allies, including Israel, have been unable to find irrefutable evidence of an ongoing hidden nuclear-weapons program in Iran, according to intelligence and diplomatic officials here and abroad. One American defense consultant told me that as yet there is “no smoking calutron,” although, like many Western government officials, he is convinced that Iran is intent on becoming a nuclear state sometime in the future.

The general anxiety about the Iranian regime is firmly grounded. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly questioned the Holocaust and expressed a desire to see the state of Israel eliminated, and he has defied the 2006 United Nations resolution calling on Iran to suspend its nuclear-enrichment program. Tehran is also active in arming Hezbol-

lah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Iran is heavily invested in nuclear technology, and has a power plant ready to go on line in the port city of Bushehr, with a second in the planning stage. In the past four years, it has tripled the number of centrifuges in operation at its main enrichment facility at Natanz, which is buried deep underground. On the other hand, the Iranian enrichment program is being monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Natanz and all Iran's major declared nuclear installations are under extensive video surveillance. I.A.E.A. inspectors have expressed frustration with Iran's level of cooperation and cited an increase in production of uranium, but they have been unable to find any evidence that enriched uranium has been diverted to an illicit weapons program.

National Intelligence Estimates, whose preparation is the responsibility of the Director of National Intelligence, Lieutenant General James Clapper, of the Air Force, are especially sensitive, because the analysts who prepare them have access to top-secret communications intercepts as well as the testimony of foreign scientists and intelligence officials, among others, who have been enlisted by the C.I.A. and its military counterpart, the Defense Intelligence Agency. In mid-February, Clapper's office provided the House and Senate intelligence committees with an update to the N.I.E. on the Iranian nuclear-weapons program. The previous assessment, issued in 2007, created consternation and anger inside the Bush Administration and in Congress by concluding, “with high confidence,” that Iran had halted a nascent nuclear-weapons program in 2003. That estimate added, “We do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.” The Bush White House had insisted that a summary of the 2007 N.I.E. be made public—an unprecedented

move—but then President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney quickly questioned its conclusions. Peter Hoekstra, a Republican from Michigan who had been chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, characterized the N.I.E. as “a piece of trash.”

The public dispute over the 2007 N.I.E. led to bitter infighting within the Obama Administration and the intelligence community over this year's N.I.E. update—a discrepancy between the available intelligence and what many in the White House and Congress believed to be true. Much of the debate, which delayed the issuing of the N.I.E. for more than four months, centered on the Defense Intelligence Agency's astonishing assessment that Iran's earlier nuclear-weapons research had been targeted at its old regional enemy, Iraq, and not at Israel, the United States, or Western Europe. One retired senior intelligence official told me that the D.I.A. analysts had determined that Iran “does not have an ongoing weapons program, and all of the available intelligence shows that the program, when it did exist, was aimed at Iraq. The Iranians thought Iraq was developing a bomb.” The Iranian nuclear-weapons program evidently came to an end following the American-led invasion of Iraq, in early 2003, and the futile hunt for the Iraqi W.M.D. arsenal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists that Iran, like Libya, halted its nuclear program in 2003 because it feared military action. “The more Iran believes that all options are on the table, the less the chance of confrontation,” Netanyahu told a joint session of Congress last week.

The D.I.A. analysts understood that the 2011 assessment would be politically explosive. “If Iran is not a nuclear threat, then the Israelis have no reason to threaten imminent military action,” the retired senior intelligence official said. “The guys working on this are good analysts, and their bosses are backing them up.”

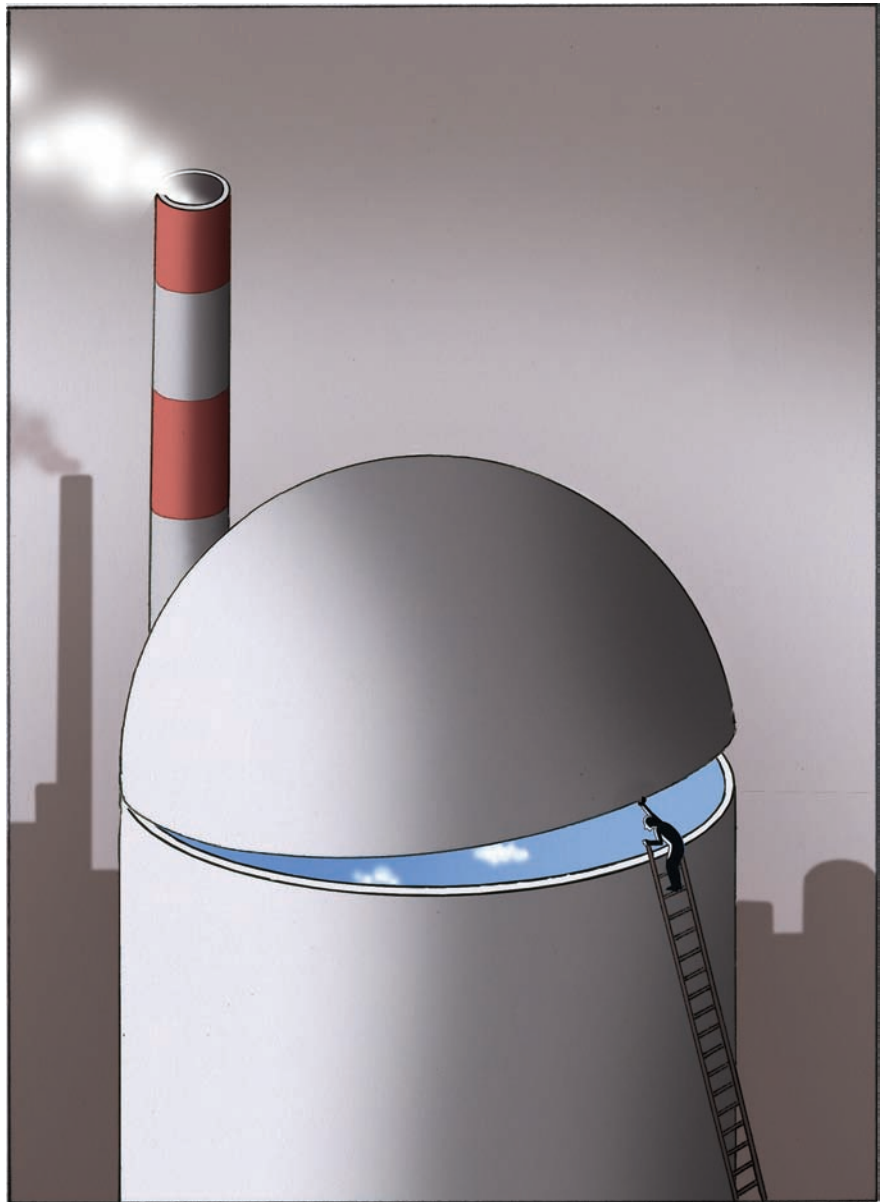
The internal debate over the Iran assessment was alluded to last fall by W. Patrick Lang, a retired Army intelligence officer who served for years as the ranking D.I.A. analyst on the Middle East and contributed to many N.I.E.s. “Do you all know what an N.I.E. is?” Lang said to an

audience at the University of Virginia. “The National Intelligence Estimate is the ground truth of the American government hammered out on the anvil of the Lord. . . . Then, once things are approved, people stand up at meetings and wave them and point to them and say, ‘See here, it says here that Saleh’”—Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of Yemen—“‘is a fink.’ And then everybody has to agree that Saleh is a fink.”

Lang told his audience that there was “enormous pressure” on intelligence analysts in 2002 to produce an N.I.E. that buttressed the Bush Administration’s claims about the threat posed by Iraq’s suspected nuclear arsenal before the invasion of Iraq. After the disaster of Iraq, the atmosphere shifted. “Analysts in the intelligence community are just refusing to sign up this time for a lot of baloney,” Lang said. “I regard that as a highly encouraging sign.” The D.I.A. analysts insisted that the updated N.I.E. deal primarily with the facts about Iran’s nuclear program, Lang told me later, and Lieutenant General Ronald L. Burgess, Jr., the director of the D.I.A., supported this approach. “These guys are not drinking the Kool-Aid,” Lang said. “They stopped the N.I.E. cold.”

Burgess, whose long career in Army intelligence includes two years with the Joint Special Operations Command, has repeatedly stressed his belief that Iran would be capable of building a bomb at some point in the future. But Burgess also told the Voice of America in January, 2010, that “the bottom-line assessments of the [2007] N.I.E. still hold true. We have not seen indication that the government has made the decision to move ahead with the program. But the fact still remains that we don’t know what we don’t know.” (A spokesman for General Burgess told me that “because of the classification of the information in the N.I.E., it would be inappropriate for us to engage in a discussion with you.”) A government consultant who has read the highly classified 2011 N.I.E. update depicted the report as reinforcing the essential conclusion of the 2007 paper: Iran halted weaponization in 2003. “There’s more evidence to support that assessment,” the consultant told me.

The D.I.A.’s conclusion that Iran’s ultimate target would have been Iraq, and not Israel or a Western power, was



There is no conclusive evidence that Iran has tried to build a bomb since 2003.

not included in the final version of the 2011 report, as presented to the United States government, in February. “It was in, and then got taken out, because, as they”—the analysts in General Clapper’s office—“told the D.I.A., ‘There’s no hard proof, and we can’t know because of the uncertainty of the information we’re getting,’” the retired senior intelligence official said. “‘But the implications of Iran’s getting nuclear weapons are so dire and the benefits to them are so great that it will compel them to continue pursuit of a nuclear capability. And you’”—meaning the D.I.A. analysts—“cannot disprove there is a weapons program.”

“It’s the same old shit: the N.I.E. does not say absolutely or unequivocally

that Iran has a nuclear program that is going to be deployed,” the retired official continued. “The important thing is that nothing substantially new has been learned in the last four years, and none of our efforts—informants, penetrations, planting of sensors—leads to a bomb.”

The N.I.E. makes it clear that U.S. intelligence has been unable to find decisive evidence that Iran has been moving enriched uranium to an underground weapon-making center. In the past six years, soldiers from the Joint Special Operations Force, working with Iranian intelligence assets, put in place cutting-edge surveillance techniques, according to two former intelligence officers. Street

signs were surreptitiously removed in heavily populated areas of Tehran—say, near a university suspected of conducting nuclear enrichment—and replaced with similar-looking signs implanted with radiation sensors. American operatives, working undercover, also removed bricks from a building or two in central Tehran that they thought housed nuclear-enrichment activities and replaced them with bricks embedded with radiation-monitoring devices.

High-powered sensors disguised as stones were spread randomly along roadways in a mountainous area where a suspected underground weapon site was under construction. The stones were capable of transmitting electronic data on the weight of the vehicles going in and out of the site; a truck going in light and coming out heavy could be hauling dirt—crucial evidence of excavation work. There is also constant satellite coverage of major suspect areas in Iran, and some American analysts were assigned the difficult task of examining footage in the hope of finding air vents—signs, perhaps, of an underground facility in lightly populated areas.

This year, when intelligence officials presented the N.I.E. on Iranian nuclear capacity to the Senate and House intelligence committees, they did not issue a summary for public consumption. The briefings were closed, but, as always, a few legislators and officials provided background accounts to the press. The

accounts were incomplete, and did not relay the essential finding of the estimate: that nothing significantly new had been learned to suggest that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon.

The few official statements at the time made it clear that U.S. intelligence officials simply did not know whether Iran would become a nuclear state. General Clapper told the Senate Intelligence Committee on February 16th, in his annual Worldwide Threat Assessment, that Iran was “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.” He added that Iran was technically capable of producing enough enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon in the next few years, “if it chooses to do so.”

A month later, in public testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan, the committee’s chairman, asked Clapper about his conclusion that Iran had not decided to re-start its nuclear-weapons work: “Is that correct?” Clapper said yes, but added that he would prefer to speak more fully in a classified hearing. Levin persisted: “O.K., but what is the level of confidence that you have? . . . Is that a high level?” Clapper responded, “Yes, it is.”

Joseph Lieberman, an Independent

who is conservative on security and foreign-policy issues and one of Israel’s strongest supporters in the Senate, chose to speak publicly about Iran after the hearing. “I can’t say much in detail,” Lieberman said, according to Agence France-Presse, “but it’s pretty clear that they’re continuing to work seriously on a nuclear-weapons program.”

Lieberman’s statement reflected the view of many in Congress and in the Obama Administration. As Presidential candidates in 2008, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton had warned of an Iranian nuclear arsenal, and occasionally spoke as if it were an established fact that Iran had decided to get the bomb. In Obama’s first prime-time news conference as President, in early February, 2009, he declared that Iran’s “financing of terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, the bellicose language that they’ve used towards Israel, their development of a nuclear weapon, or their pursuit of a nuclear weapon—that all of those things create the possibility of destabilizing the region and are not only contrary to our interests but I think are contrary to the interests of international peace.”

Thomas E. Donilon, Obama’s national-security adviser, returned to that theme a few weeks ago. In a speech on May 12th to the Washington Institution for Near East Policy, he said that the United States would continue its aggressive sanctions policy until Iran proves that its enrichment intentions are peaceful and meets all its obligations under the nonproliferation treaty, to which Iran is a signatory. “Like all N.P.T. parties, Iran has the right to peaceful nuclear energy,” Donilon said. “But it also has a responsibility to fulfill its obligations. There is no alternative to doing so.” He did not mention the current intelligence stating that there is no conclusive evidence that Iran is making any efforts to weaponize; nor could he say that the current sanctions regime is aimed at forcing Iran to stop a nuclear-weapons program that does not exist. Later in his speech, however, Donilon said that Iran’s nuclear program “is part of a larger pattern of destabilizing activities throughout the region. . . . We have no illusions about the Iranian regime’s regional ambitions. We know that they will try to exploit this period of tumult and will remain vigilant. . . . The



door to diplomacy remains open to Iran. But that diplomacy must be meaningful and not a tactical attempt to ward off sanctions."

America's sanctions policy thus is increasingly aimed, as Donilon indicated, at changing Iran's political behavior, and the spectre of nuclear-weapons development has become a tool for accomplishing that goal.

President Obama has been prudent in his public warnings about the consequences of an Iranian bomb, but he and others in his Administration have often overstated the available intelligence about Iranian intentions. Last October, Dennis Ross, a leading Administration adviser on the region, told a meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that "the challenge of Iran" was "a foremost national-security priority of the United States." He said that Iran had "significantly expanded its nuclear program," and accused it of pursuing the program "in violation of its international obligations." He also repeated the President's declaration that his Administration was "determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."

"The point here is that the pressure on Iran only continues to grow," Ross told the AIPAC convention. "Ultimately, we hope that the severe pressure Iran faces today will compel a change in behavior. . . . Its leaders should listen carefully to President Obama, who has said many times, 'We are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.'" The Obama Administration has played a leading role in winning more sanctions against Iran in the United Nations, the European Union, and Congress. The sanctions bar a wide array of weapons and missile sales to Iran, and make it more difficult for banks and other financial institutions to do business there.

In early March, Robert Einhorn, the special adviser to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for nonproliferation and arms control, gave a talk about the Iranian nuclear posture to the Arms Control Association, in which he went beyond the findings of the most recent N.I.E. "They are clearly acquiring all the necessary elements of a nuclear-weapons capability," Einhorn said. Leonard Spector, the deputy director of nonpro-

liferation studies at the Monterey Institute, and a fellow arms-control expert, pointedly asked whether the Obama Administration now believed that Iran has re-started weaponization activities. Einhorn said, "The N.I.E. addresses this issue, but, as I mentioned before, it remains classified." Einhorn also referred Spector to the most recent I.A.E.A. report on Iran, which, like previous reports, included a complaint that Tehran was refusing to help resolve a number of issues that were preventing the agency from establishing that all nuclear activities in Iran were peaceful. Iran maintains that the issues in dispute were based solely on fabricated documents. (Einhorn said in an e-mail that he would prefer not to discuss Iranian weaponization with me, as did a spokesman for Gary Samore, President Obama's special assistant for arms control.)

Officials in Western Europe and Israel told me what their governments had concluded about Iranian nuclear weapons. Although none knew of any specific evidence of an Iranian weapons program, all said that they believed that Iran was intent on getting the bomb—and quickly. One senior European diplomat complained about America's N.I.E. process. "The American intelligence community was trying desperately not to be blamed anew for an intelligence assessment, as it was in Iraq," he said. "I think Iraq paralyzed the community, and its first N.I.E. on Iran was disastrous, in my view, because it conflated weaponization with the process of developing a nuclear weapon. Weaponization is only a part of the process, but there are other parts as well, including enrichment and the development of delivery systems. Yet to the layman the N.I.E. meant that Iran hadn't been weaponizing. Yes, it may very well be the case that there is no evidence of developing a nuclear weapon. To me, that is not the whole basis of making a judgment. The more important questions are: Is Iran behaving in a way that would be rational if they were not developing a nuclear weapon? And the answer on that is very clear—their behavior only makes sense if their goal is to have the bomb. And are they doing the other elements of developing a bomb? And they definitely are. There may or may not be weaponization in

Iran today, but I don't think it is an interesting question. It says nothing about their intention." The diplomat cited as evidence of Iran's weapons intent its decision to enrich some uranium to a purity level of twenty per cent for medical purposes.

Israel views Iran, which provides material and military support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other such groups, as an existential threat. Many of its generals and political leaders have insisted for decades that once the Iranian leadership acquired a bomb—an inevitability, in their view—they would use it against Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, despite the certainty of massive retaliation. Nevertheless, most Israeli military experts agree that Iran does not now have a nuclear weapon and fear regional proliferation more than they do attack. In January, Meir Dagan, the Mossad chief between 2002 and 2010, marked his retirement by declaring that he did not believe Iran would become a nuclear power before 2015. The statement contradicted many previous Israeli estimates. But, as a former senior adviser to a Labor Prime Minister of Israel told me, the extended timeline revolves, in part, around domestic politics. Dagan believed that Iran should be handled with covert action, not with a major bombing assault. (Israeli fighter pilots have been training for years at the Hatzetim airbase, in the Negev, and at a foreign site, for a potential raid on known and suspected nuclear-weapons facilities in Iran.) "Meir is doing two things," the former official told me. "He's basically saying, 'I've overcome the Iranian threat with covert action,' and he's trying to screw up Bibi's options for going forward with an attack on Iran. And he's also keeping Bibi from taking credit for keeping Iran from going nuclear."

The political infighting in Israel over the Iranian threat continued in early May, when Ehud Barak, the Israeli Defense Minister, told the daily paper *Haaretz* that he did not believe that Iran would drop a nuclear bomb on Israel or any other country in the region. He added, in a clear swipe at Netanyahu, that Israel should not spread public fear about the Iranian nuclear program. "I don't think in terms of panic," Barak said. "I don't think [the Iranian leadership] will do anything so long as they

are in complete control of their senses, but to say that somebody really knows and understands what will happen with such a leadership sitting in a bunker in Tehran and thinking that it's going to fall in a few days . . . I don't know what it would do."

Early in the Obama Administration, Secretary of State Clinton provoked a brief diplomatic furor by raising the concept of an American nuclear deterrent to protect our allies in the Middle East. At a news conference in Bangkok, in July of 2009, Clinton noted the fears of Iran's neighbors "who come to see me and convey their deep apprehension about what might happen" if Iran gets the bomb. She then began discussing the possibility of an American nuclear umbrella in the area, which would give the Iranians pause, "because they won't be able to intimidate and dominate, as they apparently believe they can, once they have a nuclear weapon." The obvious inference was that Iran recognized the limits of nuclear power and the possibility of mutual assured destruction (MAD), the deterrent that may have kept the United States and the Soviet Union from waging nuclear warfare at the height of the Cold War.

Clinton's remarks prompted Dan Meridor, Israel's minister of intelligence and atomic energy, to say, "I was not thrilled to hear the American statement from yesterday that they will protect their allies with a nuclear umbrella, as if they had already come to terms with a nuclear Iran." Clinton quickly clarified her comments, saying that the Obama Administration was not backing away from its commitment to prevent Iran from developing the bomb. In a subsequent Sunday-morning television interview, Clinton warned Iran, "You do not have a right to obtain a nuclear weapon. You do not have the right to have the full enrichment and reprocessing cycle under your control."

Around of negotiations five months ago between Iran and the West, first in Geneva and then in Istanbul, yielded little progress. Iran continued to insist on the same two preconditions that prevented progress in earlier meetings: that the United States and its allies lift all sanctions and acknowledge Iran's right to enrich uranium. The American

response to Iran's demand, as Einhorn told the Arms Control Association in his speech a few weeks later, would be more sanctions. "We have determined that in the wake of Istanbul we have no choice but to increase the cost to Iran of refusing to engage seriously." He revealed that, because of sanctions, in recent years Iran may have lost as much as sixty billion dollars in much needed energy investments. He described other setbacks—to the shipping, banking, and transportation industries—all aimed at forcing Iran to return to negotiations. But Einhorn also acknowledged the limitation of sanctions: "While Iran's leaders are feeling the pressure, the sanctions have not yet produced a change in Iran's strategic thinking about its nuclear program."

During the Cold War, Cuba was similarly confronted by American economic sanctions. Those sanctions took effect in 1962, after Fidel Castro's nationalization of American companies doing business there. Fifty years later, the boycott is still largely in place, and so is the regime.

Meanwhile, the Iranian economy has been bolstered by booming trade with its neighbors and closer ties with Turkey and Syria. The economic and political ties with Turkey are especially significant, because Turkey has been vocal about its opposition to an Iranian bomb. "We tell the Iranians all the time that we would not like to see a nuclear bomb in Iran," a senior Turkish diplomat told me. "They know the price of not telling the truth." Billions of dollars annually in food, oil, and other goods are crossing Iran's borders, and this has strengthened Iran's political ties with its neighbors and established the country as a regional power base and as a counterweight to the Israeli and American influence.

The political stress between Washington and Tehran has promoted some unconventional thinking. A group of English diplomats and public officials have suggested thinking in terms of

containing an Iranian bomb, and not in terms of getting rid of it. "We just don't think the Iranians will deal with us," a former senior adviser to the British Foreign Office told me. "We want to talk about nuclear bombs, and they talk about regional issues." The officials at 10 Downing Street were amused by the initial optimism of the Obama Administration. "The President thought an initiative to talk about the bomb with Iran would work, and then he found it would not. And the U.S. had no Plan B."

One of the worries is that Netanyahu "might take a pot shot" at Iran, as the former adviser put it. "Everything in London is now about containment and the notion that if the Iranians get a bomb we'll have to live with it. I believe that the Iranians do understand the logic of nuclear deterrence, but the Israelis do not. London believes we cannot allow containment to be seen as a policy of failure"—in terms of a fallback policy for dealing with Iran. "And so we're trying to shift the public perception of deterrence so it is seen as a good. The Brits are really concerned about the Israelis, and what they might do unilaterally."

A third approach, championed by the American diplomat Thomas Pickering and others, is to accept Iran's nuclear-power program, but to try to internationalize it and offer Iran various incentives. Pickering is a retired ambassador who, having served in Russia, India, Israel, Jordan, and elsewhere, ended his public career by serving for three and a half years as the Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs in the Clinton Administration. He has been active in many public organizations, including the American Iranian Council, which is devoted to the normalization of relations with Iran, and most recently he has been involved in secret, back-channel talks with Palestinian leaders, with Afghans, and with some of the key advisers close to Ahmadinejad in Iran. His communications with Iran, known informally as Track II talks, have been shared since early 2005 with Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. In a recent interview, Pickering would not discuss the details of his contacts with Iran, but he did express cautious support for the findings of the 2011 N.I.E. When asked for his views about an Iranian



bomb, Pickering said, “I’ve seen nothing to indicate there is a there there, but there are indications of intent. And there may be programs we don’t know about. Even if the Iranians can be mechanical klutzes, we believe they can enrich uranium to ninety per cent.”

Pickering and his associates in the Track II talks—they include former Ambassadors William Miller, a Farsi speaker who served in the American Embassy in Tehran, and William Luers, a former president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, who spent thirty-one years in the Foreign Service—are convinced that the solution to the nuclear impasse is to turn Iran’s nuclear-enrichment programs into a multinational effort. In 2008, Pickering, Luers, and Jim Walsh, of M.I.T., published an essay in *The New York Review of Books* which called for Iran to permit two or more additional governments, such as those of France and Germany, to participate in the operation of their enrichment activities. A critical element would be prohibiting the production of weapons-grade enriched uranium or reprocessed plutonium.

The essay did not get into specifics in terms of Iranian demands, but one official involved said that the Iranians have repeatedly insisted in the Track II talks that “Washington had to give a sign that it was no longer pursuing regime change.” It is widely believed in Tehran that either Israel or America was responsible for the assassinations of two Iranian nuclear scientists last year, and that the West and Israel are determined not only to quash a nuclear program but also to force the mullahs from power. Washington, the official involved said, would need to halt covert activities against the religious leadership in Tehran and provide evidence to indicate an official end to the operations.

Pickering, Luers, and Walsh depicted what they said would be the many benefits of reengagement between the U.S. and Iran:

Surprisingly, for all their differences—over Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah, and Iran’s nuclear program—the two nations have insufficiently appreciated common interests. . . . No two countries have more common interest in the futures of Afghanistan and Iraq. . . . The U.S. and Iran are the strongest regional supporters of the current government in Baghdad; they both stress the importance of Iraq’s territorial integrity and



“Speaking of creativity, I’d like everyone to take a minute and note how Richard is using his tongue to make it look like he has three lips.”

the need to maintain a central government. The U.S. and Iran also have a common interest in supporting Afghanistan, reducing opium trafficking, and defeating Sunni extremist movements like the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Moreover, Pakistan seems to have descended into a long period of turmoil and domestic strife, with threatening implications for both Tehran and Washington.

Pickering and his colleagues have long sought a meeting with President Obama. If it were to take place, one of those involved in the Track II talks said, the message to Obama would be clear: “Get off your no-enrichment policy, which is getting you nowhere. Stop your covert activities. Give the Iranians a sign that you’re not pursuing regime change. Instead, the Iranians see continued threats, sanctions, and covert operations.”

Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient who is now a candidate for the Presidency of Egypt, spent twelve years as the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, retiring two years ago. For the past decade, he has been a central player in the dispute among America, Iran, and Israel over the bomb. In “The Age of Deception,” his recent memoir, he writes, “My best reading is that the Iranian nuclear program, including enrichment, has been for Iran the means to an

end. Tehran is determined to be recognized as a regional power. The recognition, in their view, is intricately linked to the achievement of a grand bargain with the West. Even if the intent is not to develop nuclear weapons, the successful acquisition of the full nuclear-fuel cycle, including enrichment, sends a signal of power to Iran’s neighbors and to the world, providing a sort of insurance against attack.”

“During my time at the agency,” ElBaradei told me in an earlier interview, “we haven’t seen a shred of evidence that Iran has been weaponizing, in terms of building nuclear-weapons facilities and using enriched materials.” There is evidence that Iranian scientists have studied the issues involved in building and delivering a bomb, he added, “but the American N.I.E. reported that it stopped even those studies in 2003.”

ElBaradei said, “I am not God—nobody is—and I don’t know the future intentions of Iran, but I don’t believe Iran is a clear and present danger. All I see is the hype about the threat posed by Iran.” He added, “The core issue is mutual lack of trust. I believe there will be no solution until the day that the United States and Iran sit down together to discuss the issues and put pressure on each other to find a solution.” ♦