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The Key Question about the NIE's Key Judgment

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

In the Intelligence business, you get paid for just one thing: to be right.

So here's the key question about the Key Judgment of the National Intelligence Council's new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities: *Is this judgment supported by the evidence?*

The judgment that's stirring up all the controversy -- and it's a real shocker -- comes in the very first sentence: *We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program.* The judgment is astonishing for two reasons. First, it flies in the face of virtually everything we know - or thought we knew -- about the Iranian regime, its capabilities and its intentions. Second, if the new Key Judgment is correct it means that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program fully two years before publication of the National Intelligence Council's 2005 Estimate on this same subject, which concluded "with high confidence" that Iran "currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons."

Let's hope that the new Key Judgment is correct, because it would be very good news for world peace -- although it would raise the troubling question of how our Intelligence Community could have been so wrong back in 2005. But if the new Key Judgment is incorrect -- in other words, if Iran in fact is now building nuclear weapons -- the political impact of its publication will be catastrophic. That's because it will make it virtually impossible for President Bush to stop the Iranians by launching a military attack on their nuclear facilities or by working covertly to overthrow the regime itself. And, of course, it would raise even more troubling questions about the capabilities of our Intelligence Community.

Skepticism is Warranted

Simply put, we need to know for sure whether the new Key Judgment is right or wrong. And, given the long list of failures and reversals that has plagued our Intelligence Community during the last decade, it's reasonable to be skeptical.

To understand what to do next, keep in mind that all NIEs consist of two parts: the "Key Judgments" and the text itself. It's the text that includes, or should include, the evidence that our intelligence agencies have gathered relevant to the issue at hand. Obviously, you complete the text before writing the Key Judgments, which emerge from the text itself. And because the Key Judgments are just that - judgments - it sometimes happens that the leaders of our various intelligence agencies will agree on the evidence but disagree about the meaning of the evidence. That's why there are often dissenting opinions within the Key Judgments.

What was released on Monday is only the Key Judgments. The text itself hasn't been released -- and won't be, because the text presumably contains highly classified data relating to what we've learned about Iran's nuclear programs from all sources including, of course, our spies and satellites.

But the text is available to leading members of Congress, including members of both the House and Senate intelligence oversight committees. Today -- right now, this instant -- every one of these individuals should get hold of a copy of the NIE and read it. More precisely, they should cancel whatever appointments and public events are on their calendars, turn off their cell phones, then sit quietly with a pen in hand and work their way, slowly and carefully, through the text of the NIE. And when they've done that, each Representative or Senator should step forward to report - without giving details - whether the Key Judgment about Iran's nuclear weapons

program is, or isn't, supported by the evidence.

Has Congress got the Brains?

Alas, given today's partisan political atmosphere -- and, even more distressing, the limited intellectual abilities of the people we elect -- this may not be sufficient to provide the confidence we need. If ever there was a time for a fast-track Presidential commission - this is it. Why not ask a half-dozen or so of the sharpest minds in our country to read through this NIE and to tell us - again, without providing details -- whether the Key Judgment is supported by evidence within the NIE's text. Not all members of this commission need be intelligence experts - or Iran experts, for that matter. In fact, it would be better if most aren't. The two qualities required are intellectual firepower and credibility. We ought to be able to find six such souls among the nearly 300 million of us. And the whole thing shouldn't take more than a week's time, if that.

It is no exaggeration to say that Iran holds the key to whether or not the world is facing a nuclear war. Surely, it's worth an extra effort to be confident that this time, our Intelligence Community has got it right.

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