

Matt Yglesias

Jan 17th, 2010 at 12:58 pm

Guestimating Iran

Tyler Cowen looks at the [very bad estimates](#) that experts were giving in the 1940s of when the USSR would be able to build a nuclear weapons and wonders “whether today’s estimates of Iranian production are any better.”

Today’s estimates are almost certainly worse. Sovietologists had, at a minimum, very solid evidence of Soviet *intentions*—they were trying to build a bomb as soon as possible, and when they had one they would want everyone to know about it. The Iranians are operating in a different geopolitical context, where they’re clearly trying to gain more nuclear know-how but also trying to avoid international isolation, and it’s not totally clear what they’re aiming for or how much “they” agree.

Meanwhile, read [this rundown](#) from Justin Logan of recent efforts to guess what’s happening in Iran:

“**Late 1991:** In congressional reports and CIA assessments, the United States estimates that there is a ‘high degree of certainty that the government of Iran has acquired all or virtually all of the components required for the construction of two to three nuclear weapons.’ A February 1992 report by the U.S. House of Representatives suggests that these two or three nuclear weapons will be operational between February and April 1992.”

“**February 24, 1993:** CIA director James Woolsey says that Iran is still 8 to 10 years away from being able to produce its own nuclear weapon, but with assistance from abroad it could become a nuclear power earlier.”

“**January 1995:** The director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, John Holum, testifies that Iran could have the bomb by 2003.”

“**January 5, 1995:** U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry says that Iran may be less than five years from building an atomic bomb, although ‘how soon...depends how they go about getting it.’”

“**April 29, 1996:** Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres says ‘he believes that in four years, they [Iran] may reach nuclear weapons.’”

“**October 21, 1998:** General Anthony Zinni, head of U.S. Central Command, says Iran could have the capacity to deliver nuclear weapons within five years. ‘If I were a betting man,’ he said, ‘I would say they are on track within five years, they would have the capability.’”

“**January 17, 2000:** A new CIA assessment on Iran’s nuclear capabilities says that the CIA cannot rule out the possibility that Iran may possess nuclear weapons. The assessment is based on the CIA’s admission that it cannot monitor Iran’s nuclear activities with any

precision and hence cannot exclude the prospect that Iran may have nuclear weapons.”

Have you heard that the Intelligence Community is now [working on a new NIE](#) about Iranian nuclear activities?

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Filed under: [Iran](#), [Proliferation](#),

16 Responses to “Guestimating Iran”

1. *joe from Lowell* Says:
[January 17th, 2010 at 1:55 pm](#)

Yes, the best source we have for ascertaining intelligence isn't terribly reliable.

We know this already.

So, what follows from that? If the errors were all in one directions – overestimating other countries' capabilities and dangerousness – then we could just make a point of turning down everything the CIA produces by two notches and go from there.

Unfortunately, we have Iraq in 1991 as a counter-example. The CIA underestimated their willingness to start a war, and underestimated how advanced their efforts to produce nuclear weapons were.

2. *rbel* Says:
[January 17th, 2010 at 2:29 pm](#)

The Iranian government has only one rational option: develop a few nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. It's the one and only card they could possibly have to play to prevent Israel and it's vassal from attacking in the near future.

3. *Why oh why* Says:
[January 17th, 2010 at 2:40 pm](#)

I think the most significant part of the [original Newsweek article](#) is this:

The officials, who asked for anonymity to discuss sensitive information, say the revised report will bring U.S. intel agencies more in line with other countries' spy agencies (such as Britain's MI6, Germany's BND, and Israel's Mossad), which have maintained that Iran has been pursuing a nuclear weapon...

The administration **already** bases its cautious diplomatic approach on the assumption that Iran has, in fact, been pursuing a bomb, despite intel agencies' reservations.