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Iran and Nuclear Weapons Production

Since the early 2000s, Tehran's construction of gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facilities has generated widespread concern in Congress that Tehran is pursuing nuclear weapons. According to past U.S. intelligence assessments, Tehran had the capacity to produce nuclear weapons at some point but had halted its nuclear weapons program and had not mastered all of the necessary technologies for building such weapons.

The status of Iran's nuclear program is unclear. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) withdrew inspectors from Iran after June 2025 U.S.-Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. The extent to which these attacks, as well as U.S.-Israeli airstrikes that began in February 2026, affected Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons is unclear. Prior to the 2026 airstrikes, Iran "was intending to try to recover from the devastation of its nuclear infrastructure," the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the U.S. Intelligence Community states. A June 2026 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the United States and Iran states that "Iran reaffirms that it shall not procure or develop nuclear weapons."

Background

Gas centrifuges enrich uranium by spinning uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) gas at high speeds to increase the concentration of the uranium-235 (u-235) isotope. Such centrifuges can produce both low-enriched uranium (LEU), which can be used in nuclear power reactors, and highly enriched uranium (HEU), which is one of the two types of fissile material used in nuclear weapons. Tehran has asserted that its enrichment program is only meant to produce fuel for peaceful nuclear reactors.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which effectively is no longer in force, has required Iran to implement various physical restrictions on its nuclear program, as well as to accept specific monitoring and reporting requirements. During the first Trump Administration, the President announced in May 2018 that the United States was ending U.S. participation in the JCPOA. Over time, Iran stopped implementing many of its JCPOA obligations and scaled back JCPOA-required IAEA monitoring. Beginning in July 2019, the IAEA verified that some of Iran's nuclear activities were exceeding JCPOA limits. In February 2021, Iran stopped allowing the agency to implement JCPOA-mandated verification and monitoring activities, according to a June 4, 2026, report from IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi. Since 2021, the IAEA has implemented inspections and monitoring in Iran pursuant to Tehran's comprehensive safeguards agreement only.

Tehran's expansion of an enrichment program beginning in 2019 has decreased the time needed to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for a nuclear weapon—an action

frequently termed "breakout." According to U.S. assessments, Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in late 2003. This program's goal, according to U.S. officials and the IAEA, was to develop an implosion-style nuclear weapon for Iran's Shahab-3 ballistic missile. A 2025 public U.S. intelligence assessment stated that "Iran is not building a nuclear weapon" and that the then supreme leader had "not reauthorized the nuclear weapons program he suspended in 2003." Grossi stated on March 4, 2026, that the IAEA in June 2025 had no "information indicating that there was a structured systematic [Iranian] program to build or to construct a nuclear weapon."

The U.S. government assessed prior to the JCPOA that Iran had not mastered all the necessary technologies for building a nuclear weapon. Tehran may have resumed conducting work on such technologies. The 2024 ATA observed that "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities necessary to produce a testable nuclear device." This phrase is absent from 2024 and 2025 Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) assessments of Tehran's nuclear program. The 2026 ATA states that the United States is "monitoring Iranian WMD-related capabilities and actions following" the 2026 attacks; the ATA does not address Iran's nuclear weapons activities.

The JCPOA-mandated restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, as well as the agreement's Iran-specific monitoring and reporting requirements, supplemented Tehran's obligations pursuant to the government's comprehensive IAEA safeguards agreement. Such agreements empower the agency to detect the diversion of nuclear material from peaceful purposes and to detect undeclared nuclear activities and material. These agreements also require governments to declare their entire inventory of certain nuclear materials and related facilities. Safeguards include agency inspections and monitoring of declared nuclear facilities.

Prior to and after the JCPOA's January 2016 implementation, IAEA and U.S. officials expressed confidence in the ability of both the IAEA and the U.S. intelligence community to detect an Iranian breakout attempt using either Tehran's IAEA-monitored facilities or clandestine facilities. An ODNI spokesperson stated that the U.S. intelligence community was capable of detecting Iranian efforts to build a nuclear weapon, according to an August 9, 2024, press report.

Estimated Nuclear Weapons Development Timelines

U.S. estimates concerning Iranian nuclear weapon development account for the time necessary to produce a sufficient amount of weapons-grade HEU and complete the remaining steps necessary for an implosion-style nuclear

device suitable for explosive testing. Such a device, according to the Office of Technology Assessment, uses “a shell of chemical high-explosive surrounding the nuclear material ... to rapidly and uniformly compress the nuclear material to form a supercritical mass” necessary for a sustained nuclear chain reaction.

Fissile Material Production

The time needed to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for a nuclear weapon is a function of a nuclear program’s enrichment capacity, as well as the mass and u-235 content of the UF6 stockpile fed into the enrichment process. LEU used in nuclear power reactors typically contains less than 5% u-235; research reactor fuel can be made using enriched uranium containing 20% u-235; HEU used in nuclear weapons typically contains about 90% u-235.

The JCPOA has mandated restrictions on Iran’s declared enrichment capacity and requires that Iran’s enriched uranium stockpile must not exceed 300 kilograms (kg) of UF6 containing 3.67% u-235 “or the equivalent in other chemical forms.” These restrictions constrained Iran’s nuclear program so that Tehran, using its declared enrichment facilities, would, for at least 10 years, have needed a minimum of 1 year to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for 1 nuclear weapon. This timeline would have begun to decrease after JCPOA restrictions on Iran’s enrichment capacity, as well as the mass and u-235 content of the UF6 stockpile, began to expire. The agreement scheduled these expirations to begin in January 2026.

Before the June 2025 strikes on Iran, Tehran’s number of installed centrifuges, the mass and u-235 concentration of Tehran’s enriched uranium stockpile, and number of enrichment locations exceeded JCPOA-mandated limits. Iran was also conducting JCPOA-prohibited enrichment research and development, as well as centrifuge manufacturing and installation.

A November 2024 ODNI report explained that Iran’s fissile material stockpile would, if further enriched, have been sufficient for “more than a dozen nuclear weapons.” The U.S. government estimated that Iran would have needed as little as one week to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for one nuclear weapon, according to a State Department (DOS) official in March 2022. The Defense Intelligence Agency assessed in May 2025 that Iran would have needed “probably less than one week” to produce this amount of HEU.

Had resumed implementing its JCPOA obligations, this fissile material production timeline would have increased but would have been less than one year, according to DOS officials. This estimate reflected Iran’s accumulation of knowledge gained by operating more sophisticated centrifuges. Former National Intelligence Council official Eric Brewer noted in an October 2021 publication that, absent this experience, Iran probably would have used less efficient centrifuges for a breakout attempt.

The IAEA, according to Grossi, assesses that Tehran’s enriched uranium stockpile remains in the country. The IAEA estimates that this stockpile includes 184.1 kg of UF6 containing up to 20% u-235 and 440.9 kg of UF6 containing up to 60% u-235. The latter two categories of UF6 are of particular concern because relatively little

additional effort would be necessary to produce weapons-grade HEU using UF6 containing these amounts of u-235. Iran’s Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi stated on March 15, 2026, that the country’s enriched uranium is “under the rubble” created by the June 2025 attacks on Iran’s enrichment facilities. Iran has “no plan” to recover this material, he added. In 2026, U.S. and Iranian officials have said that Iran has not resumed enriching uranium.

Weaponization

When JCPOA negotiations concluded, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Iran would have needed one year to complete the necessary steps, excluding fissile material production, for producing a nuclear weapon. This estimate assumed Iran could complete fissile material production and weaponization in parallel. Iran, therefore, would have needed about one year to produce a nuclear weapon.

A DOS official told CRS in an April 2022 email that Iran would have needed approximately one year to complete the necessary weaponization steps. This timeline took “into consideration assessed knowledge gaps” and reflected the intelligence community’s “view of Iran’s fastest reasonable path to overcome them,” the official added. The then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army General Mark Milley testified in March 2023 that Iran would need “several months to produce an actual nuclear weapon.” He did not explain the assumptions underlying this estimate. The current assessed timeline is unclear.

IAEA reports have indicated that Iran does not yet have a viable nuclear weapon design or a suitable explosive detonation system. Tehran may also lack sufficient experience in producing uranium metal; weapons-grade HEU metal for use in a nuclear weapon is first “cast and machined into suitable components for a nuclear core.”

Discussion

The one-year fissile-material breakout estimate assumed that Iran would use its declared nuclear facilities to produce fissile material for a weapon. Because the estimate did not account for a potential covert nuclear program, it did not completely measure Tehran’s potential to produce nuclear weapons. The U.S. government has assessed that Iran was more likely to use covert, rather than declared, facilities to produce the requisite fissile material; whether this is still the U.S. assessment is unclear. Neither the U.S. government nor the IAEA have publicly described evidence that Iran is conducting covert fissile material production nuclear activities.

In JCPOA negotiations, the breakout timeline was an unclassified proxy measure of Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities. A DOS official described the breakout “concept” in a September 2021 email to CRS as “a useful metric to help quantify” U.S. negotiating goals and as “a useful analytic framework to structure the negotiation of technical measures related to enrichment.”

In considering potential congressional action concerning Iran, Congress may consider requesting or requiring intelligence community briefings on the status of Tehran’s nuclear program, including Iranian plans, if any, to develop a nuclear weapon.

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