

PolicyWatch #1554

In Their Own Words: Making Sense of the International Community's Nuclear Deadline with Iran

By Max Mealy
July 20, 2009

This is the first in a series of PolicyWatches that will evaluate how the international community's Iran policy choices are being affected by Iranian nuclear progress and developments in Iran's domestic political scene since the June 12 presidential elections.

After nearly a month of international focus on the civil unrest in Iran following the June 12 presidential elections, the G8 summit in Italy brought renewed global attention to Iran's nuclear program; the summit's leaders promised to reassess international outreach to Iran at the September G20 meeting in Pittsburgh. The following statements from U.S., European, and Israeli government officials on the status of Iran's nuclear program highlight the differing interpretations of Iran's nuclear deadline.

From The United States

- "We face a real-time challenge on nuclear proliferation in Iran.... And we're deeply troubled by the proliferation risks Iran's nuclear program poses to the world. We've offered Iran a path towards assuming its rightful place in the world. But with that right comes responsibilities. We hope Iran will make the choice to fulfill them, and we will take stock of Iran's progress when we see each other this September at the G20 meeting."

-- President Barack Obama, at the G8 summit, L'Aquila, Italy, July 10, 2009. [Read his remarks](#).

- "My expectation would be that if we can begin discussions soon, shortly after the Iranian elections, we should have a fairly good sense by the end of the year as to whether they are moving in the right direction and whether the parties involved are making progress and that there's a good faith effort to resolve differences."

-- President Barack Obama after meeting with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, May 18, 2009. [Read his remarks](#).

- "A foreign intelligence agency and some UN officials estimated that Iran could reconfigure its centrifuge cascades and produce enough weapons-grade material for a bomb within six months."

-- *Iran: Where We Are Today*, a report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, May 4, 2009. [Download the report](#).

- "We think they do [have enough fissile material to build a bomb], quite frankly. And Iran having a nuclear weapon I've believed for a long time is a very, very bad outcome for the region and for the world."

-- Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during an interview with CNN, March 1, 2009. [Read the transcript](#).

- "[Iran is] not close to a stockpile, they're not close to a weapon at this point and so there is some time."

-- Secretary of Defense Robert Gates during an interview with *Meet the Press*, March 1, 2009. [Read the transcript](#).

- "We judge with moderate confidence Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough HEU [highly enriched uranium] for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame.... We judge with high confidence that Iran will not be technically capable of producing and reprocessing enough plutonium for a weapon before about 2015."

-- *National Intelligence Estimate: Iran -- Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, November 2007. [Download the report](#).

- "Oh, I don't think it ever passes the point of no return. I don't think we're at the point of no return with the North Koreans, and they've tested.... I think at any time reasonable people in a government can decide that they've gone down the wrong course and should change course."

-- Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice during an interview with Agence France Presse, December 11, 2006. [Download the transcript](#).

From Europe

- "We have made an effort to agree not to strengthen the sanctions immediately in order to get everyone on board, and those who were more reticent on the sanctions pledged to say: 'OK, Pittsburgh [location of the G20 summit in September] is when the decision will be made.'"

-- French president Nicholas Sarkozy during a press conference at the G8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy, July 8, 2009. [Read his remarks](#).

From Israel

- "The term "no-return" is misleading. Even if Iran has fissionable material for one bomb, it is still at a low grade of enrichment. And if it wants to conduct a test, it will not have even one bomb. It follows that Iran is not yet nuclear and not yet operational. Serious obstacles still lie in the way. The international community still has enough time to make it stop of its own volition."

-- Uzi Arad, national security advisor to Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, during an interview with *Haaretz*, July 11, 2009. [Read the interview](#).

- "If the project has no technical glitches, and if Iran's program does not malfunction in any way, they will have a bomb to launch by 2014."

-- Maj. Gen. Meir Dagan, director of Mossad, remarks to the Knesset Foreign Affairs Committee, June 16, 2009. [Read the article](#).

- "Iran is extremely troubling because of its speed. It has missiles which could reach Israel. The Iranian clock precedes the international dialogue clock ... by the end of the year Iran will have enough fissile material for a first nuclear bomb."

-- Brig. Gen. Yossi Baidatz, head of the research division of Military Intelligence, to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, June 1, 2009. [Read the article](#).

- "If they continue at the same pace unabated, they will have enough low-enriched uranium for one device by

the end of this year or the beginning of next year.... Once they have this breakout capacity, and if, under a certain scenario, they decide to enrich to a higher degree of enrichment and weaponize them, they can have a first device by the end of 2010, perhaps the beginning of 2011 "

-- Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, chief of staff to the Israeli minister of defense, during an address to The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium, May 7, 2009. [Download the transcript](#).

- "It is important that dialogue with Iran be limited in time, and if after three months it is clear the Iranians are prevaricating and not halting their nuclear program, the international community must take active steps."

-- Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, as reported in *Haaretz*, May 6, 2009. [Read the article](#).

- "It would take an extraordinary effort to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and 2009 is the last year in which that may be achieved."

-- Ephraim Halevy, former head of Mossad and director of the Israeli National Security Council, as reported in *Ynetnews*, August 5, 2008. [Read the article](#).

- "Today, the Iranians are one to two years away from building a nuclear bomb."

-- Maj. Gen. (ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel, Knesset member and former general in the Israel Air Force, during an interview with *Der Spiegel*, July 1, 2008. [Read the interview](#).

- "They have their timetable and are making the effort, and according to Israeli intelligence they are going to have nuclear weapons in a very short time. Whether it is in 2009 or at the end of 2008 is less important, but they are definitely going to have it within a very short period of time."

-- Aaron Abramovich, director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during an address to the thirty-fourth Annual Israel Leadership Mission, February 19, 2008. [Read the transcript](#).

- "The crucial moment is not the day of the bomb. The crucial moment is the day in which Iran will master ... the knowledge of enrichment."

[Interviewer: And how long is that?]

"A few months from now."

-- Tzipi Livni, former Israeli foreign minister, during an interview with CNN, September 17, 2006. [Read the transcript](#).

- "The issue of Iran is a very serious one. And the question is not when, technically, they will be in possession of [a] nuclear bomb. The question is when will they cross the technological line that will allow them at any given time, within six or eight months, to have [a] nuclear bomb? And this technological threshold is nearer than we anticipated.... It can be measured by months rather than years."

-- Ehud Olmert, Israeli prime minister, during an interview with CNN on May 21, 2006. [Read the transcript](#).

- "Iran is very close to the point of no return, which means the enrichment of uranium.... "

-- Gen. Shaul Mofaz, Israeli defense minister, as reported in the *Guardian*, January 27, 2005. [Read the article](#).

Next Steps

Expectations surrounding the September G20 summit will undoubtedly influence future statements by U.S., European, and Israeli officials, add to the sense of urgency driving U.S. nuclear diplomacy toward Iran, and test Israel's willingness to give the international community time to use diplomacy to bring about a change in Iran's nuclear program.

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