

Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program: Previewing the March 4-8 IAEA Board Meeting

February 27, 2024

Featuring David Albright, Richard Goldberg, and Andrea Stricker

Moderated by Anthony Ruggiero

Introductory remarks by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Welcome and thank you for joining us for this important conversation hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Mark Dubowitz, chief executive at FDD.

This timely discussion, coinciding with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Director General's report and the organization's board meeting, will dive into the status of Iran's nuclear program. Our panelists will evaluate U.S. and European responses to Iran's nuclear escalation and provide policy recommendations for Washington and allies in Europe and beyond.

On October the 7th, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei launched his 'weapon of mass distraction' amidst Hamas's barbaric attack on Israel. As America and its allies are focused on Israel's war against Hamas and responding to other threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran's proxies across the region, they risk missing that Tehran's weapon of mass destruction is barreling forward in an unprecedented fashion.

Ali Akbar Salehi, who previously served as Iran's Foreign Minister and head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said on February 12th that Iran had crossed, quote, "all the thresholds of nuclear science and technology."

He suggested that all Tehran needs to produce nuclear weapons is to assemble the relevant components. The IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi responded the next day in noting that Iran is, quote, "not entirely transparent with its nuclear program," and he urged "please let me know what you have."

It is time for the US to bring much greater international pressure on the regime in Iran. The IAEA Board of Governors meeting, which starts next week, prevents — presents an opportunity for the United States and European partners to lead an effort to pass a censure resolution insisting that Tehran halts its threatening nuclear advances, reveal its secret nuclear weapons program, and comply with the nearly six-year IAEA investigation into the regime's undeclared nuclear weapons work.

Diplomacy with the regime has been a clear failure. As administration officials have prioritized concessions over pressure, Iran has increased its regional aggression, supported Hamas's and Hezbollah's war on Israel, targeted and murdered U.S. troops, and attacked global shipping on almost a daily basis. The administration must act now to articulate and advance the new strategy.

We're delighted to have three of the leading experts on Iran's nuclear program here with us to discuss where we are and where we need to go. I'm now pleased to introduce our panel.

David Albright is founder and president of the non-profit Institute for Science and International Security, known in Washington as "the Good ISIS." He is a renowned physicist, regularly publishing and conducting scientific research, and he has written numerous assessments on secret nuclear weapons programs throughout the world and has co-authored four books.

Richard Goldberg is a senior advisor to FDD. He served as the Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction for the White House National Security Council. He was Chief of Staff for Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner and Deputy Chief of Staff and senior foreign policy advisor to former U.S. Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois in both the U.S. House and Senate.

And Andrea Stricker is Deputy Director of FDD's Nonproliferation and Biodefense Program, and an FDD research fellow. She's an expert on nuclear weapons proliferation and illicit procurement networks and has extensively researched and written on Iran's nuclear program, including its history, proliferation efforts, and diplomatic agreements.

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Moderating the discussion is Anthony Ruggiero, who's Senior Director of FDD's Nonproliferation and Biodefense Program, and a senior fellow here at FDD. His broad experience includes more than 19 years in the U.S. government in both Democratic and Republican administrations. He was deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs and NSC's [National Security Council] senior director for counter-proliferation and biodefense.

Before we dive into our featured discussion, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has been operating as an independent and non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website at fdd.org and follow us on Twitter @FDD.

And that's enough for me now, Anthony, over to you.

RUGGIERO: Thanks, Mark. We'll spend a majority of our time today looking at Iran's nuclear program, but, you know, it's really important for us to start and discuss the — Iran's action in the region, so I want to start with Rich.

Before we deep dive into the program, if you could spend a few minutes providing an overview of the situation in the Middle East since October 7, really you know, what Iran's proxies have been doing and their attacks on shipping and other things in the Red Sea?

GOLDBERG: Yes, absolutely. And I thought Mark really put it well when he talked about the “weapon of mass distraction” from the “weapon of mass destruction.” And we see that throughout the Middle East, certainly since October 7th, but actually long before October 7th as well.

Understand, all the things that you see blowing up throughout the Middle East, quite literally, all the fires being set throughout the region, whether it's Hamas in Gaza; Hezbollah in southern Lebanon; Hezbollah IRGC, Revolutionary Guard Corps; and militias in Syria, Shia militias funded, coordinated, directed by the IRGC in Iraq; or the Houthis in Yemen who are firing daily missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles fired against Israel, UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle] attacking U.S. Navy ships — we just saw a report potentially the Houthis, likely with Iran's support or direction, cutting underwater sea cables as well in the Red Sea — all of this, funded, directed, equipped, and coordinated by the IRGC and ultimately by the regime in Tehran.

And so, October 7th is the culmination of many years of building what the Ayatollah has called ‘the ring of fire around Israel,’ but also a ring of fire to control the Middle East, to wrest it from any U.S. influence, to rebalance the balance of power in the region.

And remember, this is a revolutionary power that looks to export the Islamic revolution. Its terror tentacles are not just in the Middle East. This is a regime that has been plotting to assassinate American officials on U.S. soil for several years, has attempted to kidnap Americans off of U.S. soil in recent years, and has, through Hezbollah and other actors, the ability to launch massive, catastrophic terrorist attacks on multiple continents, not just the United States but South America and Europe, in recent decades.

So, we are facing a massively funded, directed, coordinated terror apparatus by Iran, obviously its missile program, not just for itself, but proliferating to many of these actors, which we are seeing now in front of us, most particularly in Yemen, but also from the threat that Israel faces from Hezbollah on a daily basis in Lebanon, and that is the scene in which — without a lot of people noticing, while the daily coverage is on Gaza or Lebanon or Yemen — we're seeing Iran race forward with its nuclear program as well.

RUGGIERO: Thanks, Rich.

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David, it'd be great if you could start us off looking at Iran's nuclear program, you know, give the audience a sense of Iran's nuclear program.

We know in — a lot of ways, the debate has been seen through the 2015 nuclear deal lens, but Tehran's nuclear activities really have no civilian use, much — of what they're doing. And so, can you walk us through really — you know — we — and we have the new IAEA, you know, organization meeting next week, the reports come out this week — can you walk us through, you know, their enrichment activities, and then especially their cooperation or lack thereof with the International Atomic Energy Agency?

ALBRIGHT: You know, Iran's nuclear program is racing ahead. I mean, there's been a emphasis in the media to look at one aspect of, in a sense, the scale of going up from natural to weapon-grade or 90 percent to — namely to look at 60 percent enriched uranium.

But — and in the latest IAEA report that just came out yesterday, the amount of 60 percent has decreased slightly, but that's offset because of a significant increase in the amount of 20 percent enriched uranium and also — an increase in the amount of 4.5 percent enriched uranium.

And — the — if you're going to make 90 percent, if you were going to start at 20 and go up to 90, it doesn't take much longer than if you were at 60 and going up to 90.

And so — and it — and at the same time, something not reported by the media is just that Iran significantly increased the number of advanced centrifuges at its underground site at Natanz. And so, if you combine the increase in number of centrifuges, the — what you have to admit is a greater amount of enriched uranium and the slight decrease in 60 percent really is not significant — you have Iran in a position that, at this point in time, compared to last fall, it can produce more weapon-grade uranium, more quickly.

If you want to use breakout as an indicator of the threat or how much they could make, you'd — translate it into the — and having enough weapon-grade uranium for bombs — and so, last fall, they could make enough weapon-grade uranium for six nuclear weapons in a month. Now, with their increased capacity, they could make enough for seven.

And so, that's hardly a de-escalation, and I think the reporting needs and awareness needs to focus on the entire, in a sense, scale of the breakout scale that starts at natural uranium and works up step-wise up to 90 percent. And if the node at 60 percent is played a little less, that node at 20 percent was played a lot harder, and the same at the 4.5 percent level.

And so, I think overall, we're worse off today and facing a greater nuclear threat from Iran.

RUGGIERO: Right. Thank you.

And I want to bring Andrea in as well, but just wanted to give you — us a chance as well, to talk a little bit about maybe the IAEA monitoring, and, you know, I think that's another issue that doesn't get as much attention when we focus on, you know, how close they are to a nuclear weapon.

And — but what has Iran done to reduce the monitoring that IAEA has access to the information they have access to as well?

ALBRIGHT: Well, they certainly are not cooperating. And the IAEA makes it very clear in its safeguards report that Iran is not providing the kind of cooperation needed for the IAEA to determine if the program is peaceful.

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They — one example where they — they've been trying to track down for a while some — basically discrepancy in Iran's declaration of the nuclear facility, conversion facility, and the IAEA finally got Iran to admit that they didn't file an accurate declaration and that the amount — in fact — basically to cut to the chase is that there's some miss — missing uranium. And this is separate from the other issues of — that Andrea's going to talk about, about these four sites that the IAEA's been investigating.

So, here you have a new case where the IAEA has shown that there is some uranium missing and Iran fiddled around with the declaration to try to hide that, and this case actually refers to another set of undeclared nuclear activities that Iran admitted to 20 years ago.

And the lesson that you almost have to take from this is — that we thought Iran was telling the truth about that set of undeclared nuclear activities, but in fact, it was also lying and fiddling with the numbers to hide some additional un-safeguarded uranium.

RUGGIERO: Great. Thank you.

So, we'll — go to Andrea. You know, Andrea and — David and his organization and certainly FDD have — looked at these issues — and — Rich — have looked at these issues all different angles.

You know, I'd like, Andrea, if you could start off by talking about, you know, Iran's undeclared nuclear activities. You know, this is a part of the section that, you know, we're — we — for some people, we may be revealing things that are new to them, because there are other issues that are so pressing on Iran's nuclear program that it gets lost in the quarterly updates on centrifuges and enriched uranium.

But, you know, as we both know, Iran's been essentially stonewalling the organization, the agency, and its nearly six-year investigation. So, if you could walk us through that, walk through why this is important, and, you know, some of the things — responses or a lack of responses from the US and our European partners.

STRICKER: Yeah. Thanks, Anthony. Great to be with you all, and thanks to everyone tuning in.

So, the IAEA has been investigating undeclared activities and sites in Iran that have a connection to Iran's past nuclear weapons work. The latest investigation has been going on for about six years now, with little to no cooperation from Tehran. And in the IAEA's latest quarterly reports, they said there's been almost no new progress this time.

And I would add, of course, the IAEA has been investigating Iran's program since 2002, with the first public revelations that it was building secret nuclear sites. And then there was a brief pause between 2015 and 2018 under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the JCPOA.

And the latest investigation began around mid-2018, after the US had exited the Iran Nuclear Deal and Israel revealed that the Mossad had seized a huge tranche of Iranian files, photographs, program documents, computer disks really from a — Tehran warehouse, and they comprise what we call Iran's nuclear archive.

And the files really lay out a great deal more than was ever know prior about Iran's Amad plan, or the secret effort to build an initial five nuclear weapons by 2003, and then test them before moving to a large-scale production of their nuclear arsenal. And they show how Iran was working to develop the three pillars of a nuclear weapons program — the fissile material, the nuclear device, and the missile delivery capability.

And one facility still open today from the Amad plan is in fact the Fordow Enrichment Plant, and that's where the regime intended to make weapons-grade uranium for bombs. And today, they're turning out 60 percent enriched uranium, which is just a stone's throw to weapons-grade.

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So, the IAEA comes back in after Israel shared the archive and the agency had determined that it was all legitimate, and they asked to visit three sites, one of which Israel had told them about separately from the archive. And then they had questions about a fourth site. And these all involved the undeclared production or presence of nuclear material.

And Iran initially stonewalled the IAEA from having access in some cases. It moved the contents and tried to sanitize the sites, and only relented under pressure from the IAEA's Board of Governors to let the agency come in in 2019 and 2020 to inspect and take environmental samples.

Well, they ended up finding undeclared uranium particles at three of the sites. One is an open-air warehouse called Turqzabad. Another was a former pilot scale of uranium conversions facility called Varamin. And then the other was an outdoor high explosive test site called Marivan.

And the IAEA also had questions about Lavizan-Shian, which is the former headquarters of Iran's nuclear weapons program. The regime actually bulldozed that site and paved it over with a parking lot and a park in 2003 and 2004, so the Agency has focused on what became of the nuclear material that Iran was working with there.

And the IAEA's mandate here is to ensure that countries are declaring where and how and when they're producing nuclear material and conducting related activities, so that they can ensure that states are abiding by their Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty commitment not to pursue atomic weapons, and that the IAEA can sound an alarm if states are violating that obligation.

So today, the IAEA has no more questions about Marivan. And with Lavizan-Shian — David mentioned this related discrepancy involving uranium — but in general, with little help from Iran, the regime, the IAEA determined it violated its safeguards agreement by failing to declare what it's been doing at those sites and the work that took place there.

And there's still outstanding questions about, in particular Turqzabad and Varamin and where the equipment and nuclear material used at the sites are today.

RUGGIERO: Right. And these are big deals, right — you know, violating a safeguards agreement, you know, the agency, in — some of its reports, noting that it can't declare the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. These — you know, these are not seen as bigger deals, as I said, because we have all these other issues that Iran is working on — non-civilian use nuclear activities.

So, there's a tendency for this to get lost in the shuffle. And it's important, I think, to remind our audience too that this is — while it's related to the 2015 nuclear deal, a lot of these obligations that Iran has is outside of that, it's with — it — the — it's their agreements under the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] or with the IAEA specifically.

So, I want to give David a — before we move on to some of the comments that Mark mentioned, I want to deepen — deep dive into that a little bit and then I want to get Rich hasn't talked at all in this particular section — give him a chance to talk.

But David, just — I understand you've looked — you looked into how the IAEA has been talking about these Iran — or Iran's activities and the latest report. Just want to give you a chance to jump in, and then, Rich if you had anything to add as well?

ALBRIGHT: OK, thank you. Yeah, it — the IAEA's been sounding the alarm for months, and Director General Grossi's been making comments, one of which Mark referred to.

Now, IAEA tends to speak in a soft tone, but this is — what they've been saying is they've — they're really telling the world there's a serious problem here, a country may be making a move to build nuclear weapons. And we can't tell you if they are or not, but we're worried.

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And given the immense nuclear infrastructure, the past work on the Amad plan, if Iran did decide to build nuclear weapons, it could do so pretty quickly — and so — within months, in fact. And so you — the — IAEA is telling the world that this problem needs to be addressed.

And — in the report, they also throw in other cases of non-cooperation. I mean, who knew Iran's building many nuclear reactors? It announces it to the media in Iran and to the world. It refuses to fulfill its obligations to tell the IAEA about it. They're supposed to provide preliminary design information to the IAEA. They don't.

And so what you see is an Iran feeling more, in a sense — confident that it can just stick it to the IAEA and — basically get away with things that are unheard of if you go back even a couple of years.

And so I — do think the IAEA has done its job and it's time for the international community to start doing its job.

RUGGIERO: All right, Rich, go ahead. I mean, you know, that's the thing is that the — we'll talk about this later in terms of the board itself. But, you know, the IAEA is a — member-driven organization, the members being the — countries, particularly the United States and — European partners.

But, you know, there's not going to be a sentence in one of these reports that says, you know, very, very plainly 'Iran is developing a nuclear program — a nuclear weapons program.' You have to read somewhat in between the lines. And — I think they're getting as close as — we've seen them before.

But, Rich, please go ahead.

GOLDBERG: Yes. One, just a — final comment on — the undeclared activities track as well, and that is, it — it's always been interesting to me — Iran seems to like the fact that it can modulate up and down at 60 percent or its 20 percent, add some centrifuges, get the reporting on it, because it uses that part as leverage for whatever it wants today, whether it's sanctions relief, a sanctions waiver for \$10 billion from the Biden administration that needs to be renewed next month, avoiding a censure at the IAEA.

And yet, it won't allow you any answers. It won't declare. It won't tell you anything that has been going on in secret, the breadcrumbs for which we have now latched onto — great reporting by David and Andrea over the years — where the IAEA has led to all of these sites, asked all of these questions, and verified that Iran, in fact, has violated its most fundamental nuclear commitments.

And we know about secret work at universities. We know about a secret military organization called SPND that works on the nuclear weapons program. None of that available to inspectors. None of it part of what we're allowed to see, what they want us to see.

So it does make this a really core issue of, we're seeing what they want us to see, for whatever their reasons are of the moment, while disguising what they don't want us to see. And that should give us great pause.

Now, you make a good point. Rafael Grossi, the Director General, and the staff there, are staff. And we get a say in who the staff is, who the DG is every time there is an election by the Board of Governors of the IAEA.

And we got Rafael Grossi, who had been known as a maverick, as an independent-minded person from his previous roles and work and statements.

And in fact, I would argue, many would argue, we got one of the best director generals we could ask for in a long time. And we've had some really bad ones over the past couple of decades, with horror stories of allowing rogue regimes to get away with murder, quite literally.

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And in this case, Grossi is giving us everything that you could possibly ask for from a director general. There are violations going on, Iran is stonewalling. This is a major crisis. This is a problem. He's holding press conferences. He's giving interviews. He's putting it in board statements.

He's doing everything possible for the political leadership, which is us, which is the United States and our allies and the Board of Governors of the IAEA, to take that information, take the red alarm he is sounding, and do something about it, whether it's in the form of censure resolutions or referrals to the Security Council.

This now is our problem and our shirking, our responsibility to take action, based on what the Director General has told us.

RUGGIERO: Well, that's a great segue for us to talk about the — comments that — Mark mentioned in his opening, the January — or excuse me, the February 12th comments from Salehi.

You know, he went further. I — think it's useful to read these kinds of quotes, where he said, you know, quote, "here's an example — imagine what a car needs. It needs a chassis, an engine, a steering wheel, a gearbox. You're asking if we made the gearbox — box. I say yes. Have we made the engine? Yes, but each one serves its own purpose," obviously alluding to an unstructured nuclear weapons program, in my view.

And then Grossi, as — Mark mentioned, said, you know, quote, "a high level — a very high level official said, in fact, we have everything. It's disassembled. Well, please let me know what you have," end quote.

And so, you know, I think it's also important to remind our audience that in June 2023, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence told Congress that Iran is, quote, "not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons development activities that would be necessary to produce a testable device," end quote.

Now, there's a lot of caveats in just that simple, partial sentence.

So on this one, I want to start with David. I mean, you know, I — you alerted — you alluded to this in — some of your prior remarks. Can you help us make sense of these comments? You know, maybe — talk a little bit about — breakout the — parts of what would be required for breakout.

And then, you know, certainly open it up to Andrea and Rich as well to jump in and —talk through.

And then after this, we'll talk about the — prescription, the — board itself.

ALBRIGHT: There's some real disagreements on how to interpret Iran's nuclear weapons program. And — I think the picture that comes out from — excuse me — the IAEA investigation is you had a — you know, a very elaborate crash program that Andrew referred to, and — and it's the Amad plan.

And then it — that was — that particular project was ended. They didn't make the bombs, and then they — but they kept things under — in a sense, under wraps. And what the IAEA recent investigation appears to show is — that — they have kept those things. And that's why the IAEA wants to get at the containers that were at Turqzabad. A lot of equipment may be in there, materials needed to build the bomb components.

And so — and where I feel that the U.S. Intelligence Agency has failed, that it's kind of gotten stuck on this old 2007 NIE [National Intelligence Estimate]. I think the Iranian nuclear weapons program is a program where they — look at what they lack. And in 2003, they lacked the ability to make weapon-grade uranium.

Amad had made tremendous progress on most of the components of the bomb. They know how to design a nuclear weapon. They know how to initiate it. They have a very good understanding of how to start the chain reaction. But they had no weapon-grade uranium.

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And so now they are — they have that weapon-grade uranium and can produce it much more rapidly than they ever dreamed of in 2003, and they can finish the other — the —tasks that were on — that were not done in Amad within a few months.

And so, the only way I can interpret the U.S. statement that you quoted, Anthony, is —that Iran hasn't made the decision to build a nuclear weapon.

And I — and in our interactions with the Intelligence Community here on this issue, they always — they just don't want to talk about, well, how fast could they build the bomb? What do they have already done? What do they have? What are they lacking and need to do?

And when we've done the assessment, it's not that many thing and that the long pole in the tent is the weapon-grade uranium. And as I said earlier, they could make enough weapon-grade uranium for seven bombs in — a month, which means they could have enough in a week for the first one.

And they — and it also means that if they were going to build the bomb, they could wait to break out. They could start in the very secret facilities, very hard to detect, making the components of the bomb that they need, and have it stored away.

And then, late in the process, divert the enriched uranium and quickly make the weapon-grade uranium. And — a week, two weeks, the IAEA can easily be kept out of those facilities for that length of time so that it could — they could do this breakout and — rapidly and in secret.

And then, of course, people will learn about it. It would be far down the cross — the timeframe or time scale of actually getting the first one, two, or three assembled and — and ready to detonate.

Again, it won't be a missile for — a warhead for a missile, but it would be enough to say “we have nuclear weapons. You want to attack us? You can wonder if we can actually deliver those to your — to your territory.”

RUGGIERO: Great. Thanks. Just want to give Andrea and Rich — any thoughts on that one? Maybe Andrea, go ahead.

STRICKER: Yeah. I guess just to underscore all of David's great comments, the archive materials showed that Iran planned not to stop the Amad Plan in mid-2003, as Western intelligence agencies often say, but rather an effort to disperse all the activities, and then you camouflage, but continue progressing the weaponization work.

Ones that could be — have a plausible civilian justification would go to research institutions, and then ones that had maybe radioactive traces and were more overtly related to nuclear weapons, would be hidden in military institutions. And that's sort of where the trail ends as far as their planning.

But the IAEA has never had full access in Iran to be able to find out the extent of what they did in the past, which means they can't tell us today whether the program is peaceful or if any of these activities continue.

And it ...

ALBRIGHT: And it's — sorry.

STRICKER: Yeah, go ahead.

ALBRIGHT: And it's not due to the IAEA trying. Rich mentioned SPND, headed by Mohsen Fakhrizadeh until recently, the father of the Iranian nuclear weapons program. And they were stonewalled by Iran. And so the — you know, the — Iran has been very good at keeping the IAEA away from things.

And at the same time, I think based on what we assess, is they're getting better at hiding things. They know they're under, you know, tremendous scrutiny by U.S. and other Western intelligence agencies, and particularly Israel.

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And they work to make things more secret. And they work incrementally to bolster their ability to do things. And they look from — in the long-term, and we are sort of at the end of that long term when it comes to making nuclear weapons.

GOLDBERG: And I'll just jump in and just say, going back to your — the original statement you read from, I imagine DNI, Director of National Intelligence, estimate on what we assess today as a U.S. government, as the Intelligence Community on the state of their nuclear weapons, or lack thereof, program.

And it's written so carefully in nuance. And you mentioned this, that if you're a reporter who reads this testimony, if you're most members of Congress, OK, there's no nuclear program here. There's no nuclear weapons program going on. We have no evidence of that.

And then you start parsing everything. And then even if you went further with the briefers, and started asking them for their — or their own assumptions that are built into the statement, are you looking at capabilities to actually build a nuclear weapon? Is that already happening? Oh, it is. OK.

Are you taking into account that there might be R&D [Research and Development] going on towards weaponization? Is that possible, that we haven't detected SPND, at the universities? Other governments are suggesting it is going on. Is — our government believe that it might be going — oh, it might be, we just don't know. Oh, OK.

Are you assessing this based on the intent to build, as David was just saying, a deliverable nuclear device, miniaturized on a warhead ready to go on a missile? Or are you assessing potentially them building a crew device to go boom in the desert? Oh, you're looking at a missile. Oh, oh, interesting. OK.

So our entire baseline here is completely flawed in how we present it to people because we are basically creating an illusion that Iran is not working on all the elements of a nuclear weapon, they are. That they're committed to only building a nuclear weapon in some year-and-a-half published timeline that we heard about to create a deliverable nuclear device on a warhead on a missile. We don't know that to be true. That's an assumption.

So all of these things taken together with what we are talking about today of the evidence the IAEA has presented us with of Iran's obstructionism to all of the ways we would get answers to these questions should give you great pause that in fact that statement is overly parsed as David said.

And members of Congress, the media, need to dive further, need to ask the follow-up questions, need to unpack this. Because otherwise, we are missing a threat. We have made the mistake in the past of overstating a threat and we still are overcompensating unfortunately of understating a threat.

RUGGIERO: Right. I mean, perhaps we can re-up, maybe not in real time here, but afterwards with our social media team. The three of us — myself, Rich and Andrea — wrote a critique of some of those IC statements. I think that'd be useful to look at even a year later.

You know, just as we move to the board meeting, you know, I think there's comfort. Senior policy makers — pick your government — your allied and friendly government take comfort in those longer timelines, right?

I think, as David describes the fissile material production timeline getting shorter and shorter — seven and one month, if I heard David correctly — but then there's a much longer timeline that allow senior policymakers to say, "you know what? We have so many foreign policy crises. We don't really have to worry about this too much."

But frankly, it really defies logic that Iran is not working on elements of the — of this weapons program. And it's — if you ask someone who believes that they are not, as Rich just suggested, that the responses are, you know, very, you know, halting or they point to a different type of weapon that they might be working on, which is the much longer-term one.

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So, we've done a very good job of identifying the problem here — or problems, I should say, lots of problems. So, let's talk about possible solutions here.

And, you know, in fortune of good timing in and our friendly events team, this is — the next quarterly meeting is next week. Imagine that. So we're ready. We've been talking about it.

So, Rich, this is one of the many things you covered in the White House. I just want to get — pick your brain on what the importance is of this meeting and, you know, why, you know, every quarter we seemingly go through this conversation about this meeting.

And then I'm going to have Andrea really talk through the — some of the potential responses.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I'll say a couple things.

Number one, there are reasons for us to respond at the IAEA board meeting next week, because of Iran, and there are reasons to do so because of the IAEA, the NPT, and nonproliferation policy writ large.

On Iran, the DG has now reported to us another major escalation. We have two different reporting segments here that we've had now for several years. We've had their JCPOA compliance in Iran, which is, you know, like a — glass shards on the road that the car keeps going back and forth over with — to — in — basically these shards are so minuscule now you can barely see them. That's the JCPOA compliance, and they're on the road in front of you, that the IAEA is telling us about the idea that there has been no accountability on that.

And of course, there are other avenues, in addition to the IAEA, for accountability at the UN Security Council — triggering the snapback of sanctions, restoring prior resolutions. This is what was called for if Iran ever broke its commitments. And yet that's not being contemplated. It should be. It should be on the table. There are side benefits to it, which we can talk about, if snapback were to occur.

And then there's the broader issue, the second reporting element, obviously, on the undeclared nuclear activities, and Iran's non-compliance cooperation with the IAEA, its limiting of access to IAEA inspectors, its harassment over past months of IAEA inspectors.

All of this together is, like, a catastrophic fire in Vienna, in my view, that should require us to have an escalating posture politically of isolation against Iran at the Board of Governors. That starts with a censure resolution and it could go to a referral to the Security Council. I think that's long past. It should happen already.

But there's another reason to do this, because the Director General is hanging out there on a wire and he's saying all of these things, to the world, to China, to Russia, to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, anybody who either has nuclear activities, wants or is thinking about nuclear activities.

He's saying there is a part of the NPT that is in complete noncompliance at this point, breaching every single level of trust that we have. What are you going to do about it? And if we just say nothing, we're just going to let you hang out there, we eviscerate the DG, we undermine the integrity of the IAEA, we undermine the integrity of the NPT.

What's the point of this anymore? Russia wins or China wins. This is great for them. Revisionist powers who want to be able to flout international law, international treaties, using them to their advantage at times and then disavowing them when it's to their convenience. We can't allow that to happen.

So, whether you are a hawk on Iran and you want to see pressure being brought to bear, or you're a dove in nonproliferation that wants to see adherence to the NPT, there is a reason for you to come together and say the correct policy approach is pressure on Iran at the IAEA and backing up Grossi at the board.

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RUGGIERO: Great. Andrea, please go ahead and talk about, you know, the — there's always this interplay in the capitals here, in Washington, in capitals in Europe. And, you know, what kind of — you know, one of the things that I think would be useful to talk about is what kind of signal would it send to Tehran if, yet again, after a very aggressive — appropriately aggressive — report from Grossi is essentially pleading in very, very diplomatic language to do something, as Rich said and as David said earlier — what kind of signal would it send if Washington and its European allies only issue, you know, the strongly worded statements either individually or where we get a press — you know, a press comment that says, “oh, you know, 50-something countries, you know, say, oh, you know, it'd be great if Iran stopped doing this.” Imagine if they were at an organization where they could actually do something about it.

So, talk about that, and what kind of signal it would send to Tehran?

STRICKER: Yeah, from what I understand, it was only the Europeans who were talking, sort of musing about pursuing board censure of Iran next week, and they weren't very serious about it. The United States is content not to pursue censure.

And just for folks that don't understand, the IAEA's 35-member policymaking body is called the Board of Governors, and they will be voting on any kind of resolutions next week. They passed binding sets of demands or agreements on something by a two-thirds vote.

And usually, if the West wants to pass a resolution, then it usually has the votes to do so. And then at subsequent IAEA meetings, they refer, you know, in the case of Iran, whether or not it has complied. And if it hasn't, then they can refer the matter to the UN Security Council for countermeasures, like sanctions.

To be clear, board censure is just one aspect of a broader pressure campaign that we would need to roll back Iran's nuclear program, but Iran does take these resolutions seriously. And in fact, it usually seeks to avoid them by pretending to cooperate with the IAEA ahead of the meetings.

And so there has not been a new censure resolution since November 2022. So, I think that's really an extension and a sign of where the Biden administration's policy is on Iran, that they don't want to escalate, despite the obvious maligned role that Tehran is playing in all of the nuclear escalation that it has undertaken over the past three years, as the administration has pursued diplomacy.

You know, so I think if the board continues to let Iran escape accountability, then, as Rich said, they're undermining the IAEA's authority, not only with Iran but with other states, and especially after you have the Director General pleading for more support.

And then we're also just standing by as Iran reaches the nuclear threshold and can contemplate breaking out whenever it chooses.

RUGGIERO: Great. We have about 15 minutes left. So, you know, after this next question, I'm going to ask David and then we'll talk — have Andrea and Rich talk about the UN, which is another element of this and the response.

And so the IAEA meeting next week is taking place in Vienna. There's also a land war in Europe happening there where Iran plays an important role. And David, your organization has done great work digging into Iran's efforts to produce thousands of deadly kamikaze drones on Russian soil for Putin's war in Ukraine.

So, I want to give you a chance, really, to talk about Tehran's efforts there and the response from Washington in Europe.

ALBRIGHT: Well, the background is that the — one of the weaknesses in the JCPOA was to — and the UN resolution associated with it was to create ends to critical embargoes, missiles, conventional arms. And Iran has exploited that. And it also, in a way, looking back, it means these embargoes actually meant something.

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And Iran interpreted drones as under the — caught by the convention embargo, which ended in 2015 — I'm sorry, 2020 — and started to sell them around the world. And they found a very desperate buyer in terms of Russia, faced with this failure to conquer Ukraine.

And Iran stepped into the breach with a — basically a contract valued at \$1.75 billion to provide a certain number of disassembled Shahed-136 Kamikaze drones, and the wherewithal to make thousands more.

And the Russians — I mean, these contracts talk about 300,000 hours of sort of Russians getting training in Iran to make these kinds of drones and other drones too, and Iranian spending 300,000 hours in Russia teaching the Russians in the Russian factory.

And so, it's a tremendous transfer of technology. And we increasingly think that it's also going the other way. Russia is more advanced industrial, it has better industrial practices, that it knows how to improve the Iranian design, and it found several mistakes and flaws in the Shahed-136 design and it has sought to improve that. And we think that's going back to Iran so Iran's drones would be better.

Another thing is Iran was very good at developing what we call anti-jamming electronic modules inside the Shahed-136 and other Iranian drones, and more advanced than really what Russia had in its drones.

And that technology has been really helping Russia get its drones through and not being brought down by the jamming equipment. They can be shot down, but they're not being brought down by jamming equipment.

And that same kind of anti-jamming equipment goes into the missiles that Russia is building, that Iran is now providing missiles with the end of the missile embargo — UN missile embargo, providing missiles to Iran.

And so, you have a situation where Iran is helping Russia basically outgun the Ukrainians on a wide variety of weapons systems, with the drones being kind of the tip of the spear. And if you look in that electronic equipment, in the anti-jamming equipment, it's 80 percent U.S. components — Texas Instrument, digital/analog, could go on and on and on.

And one of the problems now with Iran being able to stiff it to the IAEA work, you know, without much pressure on it, is that it's keeping open these illicit supply chains that essentially our equipment is arming the weapons used by Russia and Iran — Houthis are using them too — to kill our people, kill lots of Ukrainians, and devastate Iran — Ukraine's civil infrastructure.

And so, I think one part of this that often escapes the debate on Iran is that they are doing things that pressure will help inhibit, and that needs to be a much greater priority.

RUGGIERO: Right. We're seeing that on North Korea too, North Korea missiles in Ukraine. And, you know, I — you know, I say to people in public and private, you know, sanctions do not implement or enforce themselves, right? They have to be implemented and enforced by the governments that are sponsoring them.

And when you have sanctions programs that are weaker than they should be — I mean, everyone points to the Russia sanctions — but, you know, we've got to — continually updated those but then also on the Iran and North Korea sides too. That's certainly a larger conversation.

So Rich, David mentioned the embargoes. Like you to talk about those, but then also talk about the — really, the differences between the previous administration's approach to this and the current administration, that, you know — I think you could say — or I'll say it — is this was one of those first month policy blunders on their part — and talk us through that.

And then I'll have Andrea — we have about 10 minutes left — Andrea talk about the snapback — UN sanctions snapback and those mechanisms as well.

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Please, Rich, go ahead.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, listen, the UN Security Council resolution that was adopted in 2015 alongside the JCPOA, came with a number of provisions. David talked about a couple of them and the problems. It set out these sunset provisions, not just on the nuclear program that we think about, but strategic benefits for Iran.

So, in 2020, the conventional arms embargo expired. Just last fall in October, the missile embargo expired. And in fact, it expired just 10 days after October 7th.

Now, many of us had said for years now that if you restored the prior UN Security Council resolutions and you triggered the snapback process that Andrea will talk about, you would help deter some of the behavior that you're seeing now.

Amazingly, Iran and Russia like to try to cast an air of legitimacy around their illicit behavior. And so, if there is anything they can grasp onto, they will use it in their defense. People say, well, you know, when they transferred the Shahed drones — when Iran transfers the Shahed drones to Russia, that was already a violation of the missile embargo that still existed up until last fall.

Interestingly, that was our reading of the resolution, and it seemed pretty clear to us and our European allies. The Russians and Iranians denied that. They had a different reading, and they said, “no, actually, this is legitimate because the conventional arms embargo, which covered drones, went away in 2020, and these drones are covered by that embargo, which no longer exists.”

And so, in many ways, we thought they were waiting for the missile embargo to fall off to then claim some air of legitimacy, and then begin the transfers of short-range ballistic missiles. And it appears that is what's happening now, based on current reports.

All roads inevitably lead back to the Security Council in terms of political pressure, and potentially even economic pressure on a multilateral basis, which is to say we saw this in the previous iteration of the IAEA referral to the Security Council.

If we were to see another IAEA referral to the Security Council, you end up putting the file of Iran's nuclear breaches, its misconduct, in the lap of the Security Council for action. And we know that Russia and China are defenders of Iran today. They are partners, now in wartime, together with a strategic relationship, like none other in history.

And so, we would not expect Russia or China to support any new action at the Security Council. New resolutions to reimpose a missile embargo, a conventional arms embargo, nuclear restrictions are not going to pass on any resolution through the Security Council.

And yet, if you follow through on either Iran's non-compliance with the JCPOA, which as we say is, you know, obvious to everyone at this point, or you look at their non-compliance with the NPT and their non-disclosure of what they're doing at secret sites, then you end up at the question of what can the Security Council do?

And of course, in August of 2020, the Trump administration tried to trigger that snapback mechanism which is built into the resolution. We were caught up in a presidential election. Europe didn't like Trump, Europe didn't like that Trump got out of the Iran deal. Everybody was waiting to see if Joe Biden would be president. And amazingly, one of his first actions as President was to send a letter to the Security Council withdrawing the U.S. notification on that snapback.

And so I don't want to go too much further into snapback itself and its benefits but just understand if we have a posture of not applying any political pressure at the IAEA, any political pressure at the Security Council, not using any of the tools available to us to isolate this regime, this regime knows we wouldn't be willing to do much else to them either.

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The lowest hanging fruit-type of penalties and repercussions we could have for the variety of misconduct we are seeing from Iran, whether it's having the Houthis cut an undersea cable or attack a U.S. Navy destroyer; or we're seeing three dead Americans in Jordan at the orders of a militia backed by Iran; or on the nuclear misconduct, we won't even snap back at the Security Council, we won't even do a resolution at the IAEA, but we would actually threaten them with military force?

That will be the contemplation in Tehran, and one more reason why we will be giving a green light implicitly to the regime to move forward to the nuclear threshold.

RUGGIERO: Right, I — you know, there's this tendency to have this conversation about, you know, we don't want to — the administration doesn't want to escalate by doing some of these things, some of these, you know, resolutions, but in fact, they may be — you know, whatever metaphor you want to use — they're really limiting their options and, you know, they may have to escalate beyond, you know, some of these sanctions actions. And they only have themselves to blame for that.

Andrea, I'd like you to walk us through a little more of the details of the snapback. I think people get very confused by it. And — you know, because we're all ingrained on the — Russia and China have a veto in the Security Council, why does that not matter in this instance? And then the even more difficult question of do you think this White House will actually do it?

STRICKER: Sure. So the snapback mechanism is embedded in this UN Resolution 2231, which world powers attempted to use to codify the JCPOA. But it actually empowers one party alone to act in case of Iranian non-compliance and made it so that the West could bring back all the prior UN resolutions and the sanctions architecture that they had in place between 2006 and 2010 to penalize Iran's nuclear advances in its missile and military programs.

So this mechanism remains available until October 2025, and then both it and the resolution sunset. How it works is that a remaining JCPOA participant — so the UK, France, or Germany — could notify the Security Council of Iran's significant non-performance with the deal, and then the participant — not the United States because the council said that the United States is no longer a participant — but they then table a resolution to continue the sanctions lifting against Iran, and only one permanent member of the council would need to veto it. So that would bring in the US, France, or the UK, and Russia and China could not snap — stop the snapback from happening.

So after 30 days, we would see the full return of UN sanctions against Iran. And I think, you know, it has real world effects if we don't do the snapback. Other countries will no longer enforce their Iran export and financing controls related to the illicit weapons trade. So we essentially are becoming reliant on U.S. secondary sanctions to do all the policing of the global marketplace, and we can't be everywhere and see everything.

So if we do intend to rectify this own goal — as we all have said, we've all been warning about this for years — the time has to be soon. We have about a year and a half left to salvage this architecture or else we're essentially standing by as this Russia, Iran, and China anti-Western axis will continue to undermine our leadership.

RUGGIERO: Great, thank you. So now we have just a few minutes left. Certainly, we could do concluding thoughts but I thought I'd be a little more interesting, maybe to see — do a little bit of predictions.

I think we all talked about how the administration should do a censure resolution next week. You know, I'll put each of you on the spot and just ask the question, you know, will they do it? Will we see a censure resolution next week? And, you know, I'll start with David.

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ALBRIGHT: Yeah, I'd have to vote no, despite great concern that, for the first time in 20 years, I see sort of the stars aligning, that this is the time for Iran to decide to make nuclear weapons. It's — hasn't been there for many years and the stars just haven't aligned correctly.

And so, if the US doesn't — the powers that be don't censure, I think it increases the chance Iran's going to build nuclear weapons.

RUGGIERO: Rich, I'll go to you. Less than 20 — two minutes. Please go ahead.

GOLDBERG: I don't want to take the answer to your question cause unfortunately mine would be bleak as well. So, I will say we shouldn't take no for an answer a week out, and Congress needs to make its voice heard, Republicans and Democrats.

And anybody who is reading these reports, and understanding what David laid out and what Andrea's laid out and what we've talked about today, understand that Iran just tricked you into great headlines that it's doing something good. It's not doing anything good. It's not going in the right direction, it's going in the wrong direction.

We have a \$10 billion sanctions waiver hanging out there that the President needs to make a decision on next month. We have an IAEA Board of Governors meeting right in front of us. This is the moment to demand a policy change and to understand that we're not just subsidizing all the fires around the Middle East, we're also encouraging and green lighting a race to the nuclear threshold.

RUGGIERO: Andrea?

STRICKER: I'd have to be pessimistic as well, and I think therefore the next year becomes a really dangerous time. I'd have to agree with David that Iran may think about sprinting to nuclear weapons. We have an aging Iranian Supreme Leader who wants to solidify his Islamic Republic, and he may no longer be content to sit at the nuclear threshold and reap the benefits of that. And we know what it looks like now when an aggressive, nuclear-armed state starts taking action, with Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine.

So if we're not prepared to deal with Iran now, think about Iran with nuclear weapons and how that would coerce and constrain U.S. action and threaten our allies in the region. So we have some tough decisions to make very soon.

RUGGIERO: Well, I mean, as I noted earlier too, you know, this — the censure resolution is seen as an aggressive step by the administration. This might actually be the least aggressive thing they can do because if they don't do it, the things that they may have to do with our partners in Israel and elsewhere to prevent an Iranian nuclear program that will go far beyond what a censure resolution would be.

So I want to encourage everyone, if you're, you know, interested in this — these topics and other topics from the Iran Program and elsewhere, you know, check [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org) for all of our work.

Obviously, check David Albright's website on — and his great organization. They'll have some reports coming out about the quarterly reports soon. I won't put any pressure on when those will come out, but it will be soon.

And then, thanks everyone for joining us today and the — to the panelists for a lively conversation.

END