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Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. HADLEY: Good afternoon, I'm Steve Hadley, the President's National Security Advisor. I want to talk a little bit about the recent National Intelligence Estimate that was released to the executive branch and to the Congress today. There was an earlier briefing this afternoon by the Deputy Director of National Intelligence, Don Kerr, and also by the Director of Central Intelligence, Mike Hayden. And I wanted to give a little bit more context and set the findings of the NIE in a broader historical perspective.

The introduction is going to go on a little bit; there's a lot to tell. This is a complicated estimate. The unclassified key judgments that were released today are a little difficult to sort through and I want to try and lay this out for everybody, so I'll have an opening statement, probably 15-20 minutes, but there will be lots of time to answer questions at the end.

The Director of National Intelligence has today released the unclassified key judgments from the intelligence community's latest estimate of Iran's nuclear weapons efforts and its uranium enrichment program. The classified version of this National Intelligence Estimate was briefed to the President last Wednesday, November 28, and has been delivered to relevant congressional committees this morning.

On balance, the estimate is good news. On one hand, it confirms that we were right to be worried about Iran seeking to develop nuclear weapons. On the other hand, it tells us that we have made some progress in trying to ensure that that does not happen. But it also tells us that the risk of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon remains a very serious problem.

The estimate offers grounds for hope that the problem can be solved diplomatically, without the use of force, as the administration has been trying to do. And it suggests we have the right strategy: intensified international pressure, along with a willingness to negotiate a solution that serves Iranian interests while ensuring the world that it will never have to face a nuclear-armed Iran. But the bottom line is that for that strategy to succeed, the international community has to turn up the pressure on Iran -- with diplomatic isolation, United Nations sanctions, and with other financial pressure. And Iran has to decide that it wants to negotiate a solution.

This is a complicated subject and the new Intelligence Estimate is a complicated document. Let me

summarize the key judgments and then try and walk you through it and answer your questions. First, let me summarize the key judgments. The IC has high confidence -- high confidence -- that Iran had a covert nuclear weapons program that it has never acknowledged and continues to deny. The intelligence community has high confidence that Iran halted its covert nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003. And they have moderate confidence that it had not restarted that program as of mid-2007.

They judge with high confidence that the halt in other nuclear-related decisions was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure, resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work involving uranium enrichment. The intelligence community says they do not know whether Iran currently intends to develop nuclear weapons, but they assess with moderate to high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. And the intelligence community assesses with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult.

Let me see if I can unpack this a bit and put it in context. First, remember how we got here. A little background: If a state is looking to become a nuclear-weaponized state, it needs three things. It needs weapons-grade nuclear material. It needs the technical know-how to fashion this nuclear material into a weapon. And it needs a means to deliver the weapon on a target, like a ballistic missile. The hardest step in today's world is acquiring weapons-grade nuclear material. Unless you steal it, there are two ways to get it: If you have a nuclear power reactor you can reprocess spent fuel coming out of that reactor, or you can create nuclear material by a process called uranium enrichment. This process produces fuel for nuclear power reactors, but it can also create weapons-grade nuclear material for a nuclear bomb.

In 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and pledged never to seek to acquire nuclear weapons. That's what Iran undertook to do. It signed what is called a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, or the IAEA, under which it was to declare all its nuclear-related activities and open itself up to inspections by the IAEA.

In August 2002, an Iranian opposition group revealed the existence of a secret uranium enrichment plant in Iran at a place called Natans. The plant was secret. It had not been declared, as required, to the IAEA. Iran at that time had no operational nuclear power reactors, so why did it need a uranium enrichment plant? Iran was actively developing ballistic missiles. These facts raised a real concern that this was all part of an effort to develop nuclear weapons. So the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, backed by the international community, began a vigorous effort to convince Iran to suspend its enrichment activity, and thus reassure the world that it did not intend to develop nuclear weapons.

And the pressure seemed to work. In October 2003, Iran agreed to cooperate with the IAEA and suspend its uranium enrichment activities. Considerable further diplomacy involving both the IAEA and what's called the EU-3 -- representatives of Britain, France and Germany -- resulted in what's called the Paris Agreement of November 2004. In this agreement, Iran reaffirmed and extended the suspension of its enrichment activities. And the EU-3 agreed to negotiate long-term technology, economic and security arrangements for Iran.

Despite this progress, the intelligence community in May of 2005 assessed with high confidence that

Iran currently was determined to develop nuclear weapons. The intelligence community maintained this assessment throughout this year, 2007. Indeed, Director of National Intelligence Negroponte told an open session of the House intelligence community on January 1, 2007, that, "our assessment is that Tehran is determined to develop nuclear weapons." DNI McConnell later told a Senate panel in open session on February 27 that, "We assess that Tehran seeks to develop nuclear weapons."

The irony is that one month after the intelligence community released this assessment, in June of 2005, Ahmadinejad wins a runoff election and becomes Iran's President. On August 1, 2005, just two months after taking power, Ahmadinejad informs the IAEA that he has decided to resume uranium enrichment, and does so beginning in January 2006.

For the next two years, through a whole series of IAEA Board of Governors resolutions urging Iranian compliance, through two U.N. Security Council sanctions resolutions, sweetened by negotiating offers by the EU-3 and the promise that the United States would join those negotiations, the international community tried unsuccessfully to get Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities, and those efforts to get the suspension continue today.

Also during this period, the President directs the intelligence community to enhance its capabilities to gather intelligence on Iran's nuclear programs.

Earlier this year, Congress called for a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. It is in part delayed in order to process -- the finalization of that NIE is delayed in part in order to process new intelligence, some of which has been received in the last few months.

The National Intelligence Estimate released today reveals that there was a covert nuclear weapons program. It also reveals that, unknown to us, that program was halted in the fall of 2003. So the covert nuclear weapons program was unknown to us, suspected, unknown; now confirmed. But what was also unknown was that the program was halted in the fall of 2003. That secret -- that covert nuclear weapons program was halted at the same time the Iranians publicly announced that they were suspending their public and declared uranium enrichment program.

So where does that leave us? One, we have good reason to continue to be concerned about Iran developing a nuclear weapon, even after this most recent National Intelligence Estimate. In the words of the NIE, "Iranian entities are continuing to develop a range of technical capabilities that could be applied to producing nuclear weapons if a decision is made to do so." For example, Iran's civilian uranium enrichment program is continuing. And as you know, once a country masters the technology to enrich uranium for use even in a civilian nuclear power program, it could readily use the same technology to produce weapons-grade uranium. As we have said, weapons-grade uranium is the long pole in the tent for a nuclear weapon.

And Iran continues to develop, test and deploy ballistic missiles -- a very attractive delivery system for a nuclear weapon. For example, the Iranian Defense Minister publicly acknowledged a medium-range ballistic missile called the Ashura, which could reach much of Eastern Europe.

Finally, we are very unsure of Iran's attentions [sic], even with respect to the covert nuclear weapons

program that Iran has halted. Again, let me quote the National Intelligence Estimate: "We do not have sufficient intelligence to judge confidentially whether Tehran is willing to maintain the halt of its nuclear weapons program indefinitely while it weighs its options, or whether it will or already has set specific deadlines or criteria that will prompt it to restart the program."

Again from the NIE: "We assess with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual deployment of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership probably see between nuclear weapons development and Iran's key national security and foreign policy objectives."

But the NIE gives us reason to believe that our current strategy stands the best chance of convincing Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions. Again, let me quote for a final time from the NIE: "Our assessment that Iran halted the program in 2003, primarily in response to international pressure, indicates Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach, rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of political, economic and military costs. This in turn suggests that some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige and goals for regional influence in other ways might, if perceived by Iran's leaders as credible, prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program. It is difficult to specify just what such a combination might be."

We have been pursuing this very strategy for over two years, since Iran resumed its nuclear enrichment. If we are to avoid the grim choice between accepting an Iran on the path to nuclear weapons or considering the use of force, we need to intensify our pressure on Iran, while making clear that if they do suspend enrichment, there is an opportunity for better relations with the international community.

And with that, I'll stop and I'd be pleased to answer your questions.

Q It is troubling that the United States was so wrong about what Iran was doing or what its intentions were?

MR. HADLEY: I don't think we were wrong about what it's doing or what its intentions were. Our concern was that they were pursuing a nuclear weapon. We saw the enrichment, which we couldn't really explain; we saw the ballistic missiles. And it led people to conclude: We are concerned that they were pursuing a nuclear weapons program and might have a covert program to actually weaponize highly-enriched uranium in order to be a nuclear weapon. And that's what the NIE has now discovered.

The President said some months ago, probably over a year ago, we need to have better intelligence on Iran's nuclear program; we have these suspicions, we have this concern, we need better intelligence to get greater certainty. The intelligence community increased their efforts, and lo and behold, in the last few months we get credible evidence that gives them a high confidence that they had a covert nuclear weapons program to weaponize weapons grade highly-enriched uranium into a weapon.

Q But in 2005 you thought that they had a nuclear weapons program, whereas you now think they

abandoned it, or put it aside in 2003.

MR. HADLEY: We thought they had that program, we did indeed, in 2005.

Q So that's what I meant when I said, wrong.

MR. HADLEY: We have looked at it and we have determined that, indeed, they did have a program, and a covert program, which we had not been able to detect, but we also determined that they had suspended it in -- or halted it -- which is the term of art -- in fall of 2003 in response to international pressure. That's exactly right.

Q But, Steve, the question is, how did the government get it wrong? And isn't that troubling that it got so wrong over that two-year span?

MR. HADLEY: I don't think it is so wrong. I think it is right. If they had been saying in 2005 not to worry, Iran has no nuclear weapons ambitions, then we would have clearly got it wrong, because they did have such a program. I would say to you, they got it right, in terms of being concerned about Iran seeking a nuclear weapon. And we continue to be concerned about a nuclear weapon.

Remember, Iran is one of a handful of the hardest intelligence targets going. They are very good at this business of keeping secrets. And there's probably no secret that will be more closely kept by Iran than what it's doing on nuclear weapons. So I think the fact that we have got this additional information is an indication that we are succeeding in learning more about this program. And I think you have to recognize we're going to continue to dig, continue to learn more, and that's a good thing. That's --

Q Steve, let me follow on this point. If we now estimate with high confidence that it was shut down as of 2003, that it was halted, in October of this year, in 2007, the President is speaking about the Iranian threat, in terms of World War III. Why wouldn't you conclude that this President is hyping the threat?

MR. HADLEY: Because he was describing the threat as the intelligence community itself had been describing the threat both publicly and in their briefings to him. The President, as I think if you look at the testimony that was given by Don Kerr and Mike Hayden today, they basically said that the intelligence community finally came to the judgments that they came to on this issue Tuesday of last week. The President was briefed on Wednesday. So this is challenging information. The intelligence community had to decide what they thought about it. They were sufficiently uncertain about it that they delayed the publication of the NIE until they could come to the bottom of it, reach their conclusions, present it to the President, as they did on Wednesday, and then at that point, obviously, we wanted to get it out quickly.

Q They describe the Iranian threat today differently than the President would have even a month ago.

MR. HADLEY: Because our intelligence community has told us effective today that their assessment is somewhat different than it was before. That's correct.

Q How does this -- how does this not undercut the effort to get an international coalition? The urgency of doing that -- I would think all the international partners would say, wait a minute, they haven't had a program since 2003, so let's back off a little with the urgency.

MR. HADLEY: I think there is going to be a tendency or a lot of people to say, the problem is less bad than we thought, let's relax. And I think our view is that would be a mistake. Why? Because, as we said, in today's world the critical problem for making a nuclear weapon is getting the weapons-grade nuclear material. And for Iran, they are trying to get the capability to do that. Let me put it this way, their path to getting that capability is the enrichment program.

This is the program that they agreed to shut down in 2003, 2004, but restarted in 2005. It has been championed by Ahmadinejad. He is now making public announcements that they have 3,000 centrifuges and have mastered that technology. You don't need to take those assertions to the bank to be concerned that Iran is getting to the point where it will have mastered the ability to enrich uranium. And having mastered that ability to enrich uranium, they have the -- they will have the capacity to make weapons-grade nuclear uranium. That is the long pole in the tent, and that's what the international community has been trying, in a pretty united way, for the last three or four years to get the Iranians to suspend.

Q What do you know about the program that you say now you have confirmed the Iranians were conducting, that they suspended in 2003? What do you know about that program now? How long had that program been in place? How effective, how far along before they halted?

MR. HADLEY: Those are good questions. They are questions that I think Don Kerr and Mike Hayden should address. Some of this gets into portions of these materials that are still classified. Let me read you, though, I think as a starting point, a footnote that appears in the declassified key judgments that were put out today.

When you talk about a nuclear weapons program, what the intelligence community says they mean is Iran's nuclear weapon design -- that is to say, an effort to design a nuclear weapon. And weaponization work -- that is to say, taking weapons-grade uranium and adapting it so that it can be an operational nuclear weapon. And covert uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related work. And that suggests that part of the program was a covert uranium enrichment facility.

And why would we worry about that? Because we would worry about it that in -- paired with an overt, declared uranium enrichment program, the information and know-how gleaned by that -- from that public uranium enrichment program could be passed at some time -- in the past or in the future -- to a covert uranium enrichment program, which could be used to develop and produce nuclear weapons grade material for a nuclear weapon.

Q There had to be more than an inkling before today that this information, this intelligence, that the Iranians had an ongoing nuclear weapons program was incorrect. So why wasn't -- why then would the President allow it or advise to go ahead with ratcheting up the rhetoric, instead of toning it down, when right now this obviously raises issues of credibility with the American public and with American allies about U.S. intelligence?

MR. HADLEY: Two things. One, when the President was told that we had some additional information, he was basically told: stand down; needs to be evaluated; we'll come to you and tell you what we think it means. So this was basically -- as we said, this is information that came in the last few months, and the intelligence community spent a lot time to get on top of it.

Secondly, I would disagree with you that the President has ratcheted up the rhetoric. We have said -- he has said, I have said, other administration officials have said many times, look, we want diplomacy to work. Because, as I said in my statement, we don't want to be in a situation where the only two choices this or a future President has is to accept Iran on a path to a nuclear weapon or to have to contemplate the use of nuclear force -- sorry, use of military force. Because that in the context of today's Middle East is a big move.

And so the President, in that statement -- as he said before and as he explained afterwards -- was trying to give a wake-up call to the international community that we needed to step up the diplomacy and step up the pressure to get Iran to suspend its declared uranium enrichment program. And that still is the case today, because that is the path to weapons-grade material which would give Iran the option in the future to produce a nuclear weapon.

Q The President -- you said the President was told to stand down on that --

MR. HADLEY: No, I said just the opposite. I said the President was told, we have some information, we have some new information not to stand down -- said, we have some new information; give us some time to analyze it, and we will come to you and tell you what we think it means.

Q Was he told that before or after --

MR. HADLEY: And that's what he was told, and they -- as was briefed by the intelligence community today, they came to their final judgments on Tuesday of last week, and they told the President of the United States on Wednesday.

Q But was he given that advice before or after the World War III comment?

MR. HADLEY: I'll have to -- I'll have to look.

Q Which was on October 20th.

MR. HADLEY: From my mind, it doesn't make any difference, because the World War III comment you characterize as stepping up the rhetoric. I would say it was making a point that the President and we have been making for two or three years, that the international community has to exert more pressure because Iran needs to suspend its enrichment program.

That was the position of our policy before the National Intelligence Estimate, and for the reasons I said. That continues to be our policy after this latest National Intelligence Estimate.

Q Steve, just to clarify.

MR. HADLEY: Sure.

Q Is it fair to say that the intelligence came in, in recent weeks, not recent months? Because this -- as was pointed out, the press briefing was late October when the President was asked definitively, do you believe Iran wants to build a nuclear bomb? And that's where you get, in the second part of that answer, the World War III comment.

MR. HADLEY: Correct.

Q So was it recent weeks that this intelligence came in?

MR. HADLEY: What the intelligence community has said is in the last few months. And again I would say, if they were working on this information before that quote in October, again, in terms of the point the President was making, he would have made that comment before we got -- the intelligence community got this information. He would have made that, I believe, that comment after. I just made it in this statement, which is, the international community has to understand that if we want to avoid a situation where we either have to accept Iran on the road to a nuclear weapon, with a path to a nuclear weapon, or the possibility of having to use force to stop it, with all the connotations of World War III, then we need to step up the diplomacy, step up the pressure to get Iran to stop their civilian -- so-called civilian uranium enrichment program. That was our policy before his October comment, that was the policy between October -- his October comment and today, and that's our policy going forward; no change.

Q Steve, you just said you would describe it quite different. Just a minute ago --

MR. HADLEY: I think that's right. And we would describe it --

Q Are you being consistent? I don't think you're being consistent.

MR. HADLEY: I am being consistent, because what we can say now is, that they actually had -- which we did not know at the time of 2005 -- they actually had a covert weapons program, which means we were right to be concerned; it was probably worse than we thought.

We would also say now, but that program, that covert nuclear weapon program has been suspended. And therefore it is important for our policy to continue to put diplomatic pressure on Iran so that the suspension -- the halting, excuse me -- the halting of their covert nuclear weapons program continues and that they suspend their uranium enrichment program. Because if you can do both of those things, maintain the halting of the nuclear weapons program and obtain the suspension of the uranium enrichment program, you've got some real assurance that Iran is not going to be on the path towards a nuclear weapon -- assuming they don't steal the weapon, they don't get weapons-grade nuclear material from some other source. And it still leaves the worrisome fact that they're working and developing ballistic missiles.

But it is a -- so I would describe our posture differently. I would describe our assessment -- the intelligence community would describe the assessment in a different way. But in terms of our policy, it continues to be one. And I would say it both underscores the urgency of the policy, and also gives us some confidence that it actually can work, but only if we pick up the pace.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Given the halting, as you described it, does this strengthen the position of Russia and China on sanctions, specifically?

MR. HADLEY: Well, we hope not, because as I said, the problem presented by the continuing uranium enrichment program continues, because that is the long pole for a country like Iran on the way towards having a path towards a nuclear weapon. That's something that Russia has said clearly they don't want Iran to do; that's something we think, less clearly, China has said the same thing.

So again, as the President says many times, we're asking people to do hard things. We're asking people to put pressure on Iran, and it has consequences for their diplomacy, it has consequences for their companies doing business with Iran. People don't like to do that. So I'm sure some people will try and use this as an excuse or a pretext for flagging on the effort.

Our argument is, actually, it should be just the reverse, because we need to keep the halting of the nuclear weapons program in place; we need to achieve the suspension of the enrichment program; and the only way -- what this NIE says is that the best path to do that is to continue what we've been doing, which is diplomatic isolation, U.N. sanctions and other financial pressure, plus the option for negotiations.

Q Second question. When did the Vice President get briefed on this? Because he was warning of serious consequences just last month, too.

MR. HADLEY: I've just got a note from him -- I did it once, I'll do it again. In terms of stand down, they did not tell the President to stand down and stop talking about Iran's nuclear program; they told him just the opposite: Mr. President, we have new information. Or let me put it this way, not just the opposite, let me be precise. He was not told to stop talking about Iran's nuclear weapons program. He was not told to change what he says about it. What he was told was, we have new information; it is interesting; it is going to take us some time to understand it, to assess it, to know what it means, and to know how credible it is, and we will come back to you when that process is done. And they did. And they came back to him Wednesday, and the results of their work is included in this estimate. Is that okay? (Laughter.)

I'm sorry, you asked a question and I didn't answer. Could you restate it, please?

Q When was the Vice President briefed on this? You mentioned when the President was, what about the Vice President?

MR. HADLEY: He, of course, can answer that for himself. I will say that the week before the Tuesday/Wednesday, there was a meeting that was held with the principals -- including the Vice President, myself and others -- to get a preliminary look at this information, to get some sense of it, and to give us an opportunity to test it and ask questions about it, and probe it a little bit, as part -- and we thought, one, so we would understand it, and two, as part of the process for the intelligence community, you know, coming to its conclusion about what this all meant. And those were the conclusions that they reached on Tuesday, and which were briefed to the President on Wednesday of last week.

Peter.

Q Steve, when was the first time the President was given the inkling of something? I'm not clear on this. Was this months ago, when the first information started to become available to intelligence agencies?

MR. HADLEY: You ought to go back to the intelligence community. We will get you an answer on that. There's two questions: one, when did they first get the information? -- you ought to ask that to them -- two, when was the President notified that there was new information available? We'll try and get you a precise answer. As I say, it was, in my recollection, is in the last few months. Whether that is October -- August, September, we'll try and get you an answer to that.

Q What about the -- I mean, in your view, for a lot of people will sound like echoes of Iraq, what we thought they -- we talked about what programs we thought they had -- in fact they suspended it or stopped it and so forth. I mean, how does this affect the credibility of everything you want to say about this or any other threat that might be out there in the world today?

MR. HADLEY: Well, I think all we can do is try and -- and I think all the intelligence community can do -- is try and get the best information they can, to try and be straight with the Congress and the President about how they assess that information, with what level of confidence, and to continue to get additional information. And when they get that additional information, if it changes their assessment, to come out and so inform people. You know, these are not puzzles that once you solve them, you have solved them for all times. These are challenges that are ongoing against very hard targets that lie, that try and prevent things from becoming public, and that try and mislead. And it is a very difficult intelligence channel.

So I think the answer is, in some sense, you know, welcome to the real world. And so the challenge for the intelligence community is to say, in all of this work -- and it's very challenging -- what they know, what they assess, what's the confidence of their assessment, and what they don't know. And that's what the intelligence community tries to do, and I think in some sense the unclassified key judgments -- if you read them with care -- show very clearly that that's what they're trying to do. And I will tell you, I'm sure we are going to -- I hope we are going to learn more, and that's probably going to change what we know and probably change our assessments, probably change our confidence level, because this is going to be something that this administration and future administrations are working with for a long time.

Q Just to turn your premise around a little bit, you said that you should keep the pressure up on the

international -- with the international community. But doesn't the fact that Iran halted its program, even if it was covert, suggest that perhaps there is room for a negotiated settlement that would keep nuclear weapons out of the government --

MR. HADLEY: Yes, I said two things. I said we need to keep the pressure up, but also make clear there is a path for negotiation that will assess Iranian concerns. Our job is to keep up the pressure, but also to offer this negotiating path. But in the end of the day, the Iranians have to signal that they're willing to accept a negotiation path. And as you know, there have been now almost three years of off-and-on meetings -- two years probably -- off-and-on meetings between an Iranian negotiator -- for the longest time that was Larijani -- and with the EU-3, in terms of Javier Solana; that various offers have been put down for the EU-3 about how to address Iran's security, economic and diplomatic concerns; a path where Iran could reliably know that it could have a purely civil nuclear power program. There have been several offers of that sort.

So the combination that the intelligence community says is most likely to work is pressure, plus a negotiating option. That continues to be the case to this day. But at some point, Iran has to indicate a willingness to sit down and negotiate. And that's what we have not yet seen.

Thank you very much.

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