

Iran nuclear claim runs into a harder question

U.S. strikes may have damaged Iran's program, but experts say uranium stockpiles and weapons knowledge make denuclearization far from settled.



President Donald Trump says his administration has achieved the “essential denuclearization” of Iran, but nuclear policy specialists say the evidence does not support that conclusion, according to reporting by PBS NewsHour and PolitiFact. The disagreement matters because it is not only about whether a political claim is accurate. It is about whether military attacks can remove a nuclear threat, or whether they can damage equipment while making the larger problem harder to solve.

Denuclearization means taking away a country's ability to build nuclear weapons, not just damaging buildings connected to a nuclear program. In Iran's case, experts told PolitiFact that U.S. and allied attacks have likely set back parts of the program, especially after U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites in June 2025. But they said that is very different from eliminating the program.

One reason is uranium. Enriched uranium is uranium that has been processed so it contains a higher share of the type of uranium that can be used for nuclear fuel and, at higher levels, nuclear weapons. Iran has barred international inspectors from its nuclear facilities, so outside information is limited. Still, Matthew Bunn, a nuclear policy specialist at Harvard, told PolitiFact that Iran still has enough highly enriched uranium stockpiled to produce a dozen or more nuclear weapons over time. He also said Iran likely has advanced centrifuges and parts. Centrifuges are machines that spin uranium gas at very high speeds to enrich uranium further.

The White House argues that military operations under Trump have devastated Iran's nuclear facilities and broader military and economic power. It says the United States and its allies are safer because of the war the U.S. launched on Feb. 28. Experts interviewed by PolitiFact did not say the strikes had no effect. Several said the 2025 attacks significantly degraded Iran's program, meaning they damaged it enough to slow Iran down and make rebuilding harder.

The dispute is over how much that proves. A nuclear program is not only a set of buildings. It is also stored material, hidden machinery, trained scientists, technical records and political decisions. Richard Nephew, a Columbia University scholar who studies nuclear policy, said that even if Iran had to begin again, the knowledge it has already gained could allow it to produce a weapon in a couple of years. That is why experts were skeptical of describing Iran as essentially denuclearized.

The story also shows a serious trade-off. Military strikes may be able to destroy or damage visible sites. But they may not reach uranium and equipment that have been moved or hidden. PolitiFact's experts said a military mission to seize or destroy those materials could require many troops on the ground, which would be a major escalation and might still fail if the materials were well concealed.

Diplomacy has a different weakness. A diplomatic agreement could include limits on enrichment and in-depth inspections, which are important because inspectors can verify what is happening over time. But experts said the war may have made Iran's leaders

less willing to accept such a deal. Some argued that being attacked by the United States and Israel could strengthen hard-liners inside Iran and increase the regime's desire for nuclear weapons as protection against future attacks.

That creates the central tension: the tool that can show immediate force may reduce the chance of the slower tool that provides verification. A ceasefire arrangement meant to open the way to talks on Iran's nuclear program expired Aug. 17, and the two countries remain far apart. One analyst cited by PolitiFact

argued that a lasting solution may depend on regime change, meaning a new government in Iran. But that is also a goal the U.S. has not achieved.

The result is an uncomfortable middle ground. Iran's nuclear program may be damaged, but damage is not the same as denuclearization. The harder question is whether the United States has reduced the long-term risk of an Iranian nuclear weapon, or whether it has only made that risk less visible and more difficult to negotiate.

Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. If a military strike can slow a nuclear program but also make negotiations and inspections less likely, when, if ever, is that trade-off worth it?

2. What evidence should be required before a government claims another country has been denuclearized?

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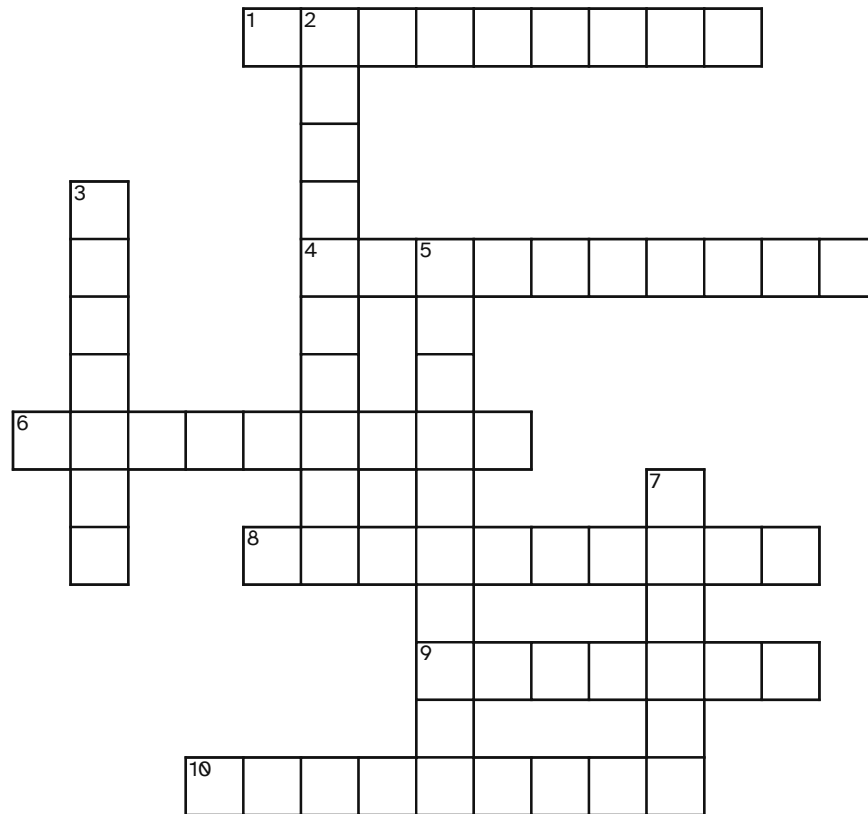
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CEASEFIRE CENTRIFUGE DIPLOMACY ENRICHMENT
ESCALATION INSPECTION NEGOTIATE NUCLEAR REGIME
URANIUM

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ACROSS

- 1 Use of talks and agreements between governments
- 4 Increase in a conflict's size, intensity, or seriousness
- 6 Try to reach an agreement through discussion with another side
- 8 Process of raising the share of a desired form of an element
- 9 Heavy radioactive element used for reactor fuel or weapons
- 10 Agreement to stop fighting for a limited time

DOWN

- 2 Careful official check that rules are being followed
- 3 Related to energy and weapons involving atoms
- 5 Machine that spins material quickly to separate or process it
- 7 Government or system through which a country is ruled

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

PBS NewsHour

“Enriched uranium stockpile undercuts Trump claim of Iran's 'essential denuclearization'”

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<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/enriched-uranium-stockpile-undercuts-trump-claim-of-irans-essential-denuclearization>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article and two discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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