

THE NUCLEAR CLUB

Who Has Them, How They Got Them, and Who's Close

Annex JR0001.A

A reference companion to the series "Death to America: The History Behind the Chant." Compiled September 11, 2026. Last verification pass: October 7, 2026. Warhead figures from the Federation of American Scientists and SIPRI, the two standard open sources.

This is Revision A. If a later revision exists (JR0001.B and onward) it supersedes this one and is listed in the Annex at jonrodebaugh.com.

Most Americans can name three nuclear powers. There are nine.

[As of the beginning of 2026, those nine hold roughly 12,187 warheads in total inventory. About 9,745 sit in military stockpiles assigned to operational forces. The United States and Russia account for about 86 percent of the total. The Cold War peak was roughly 70,300 in 1986 — and while total inventories are still falling, the number of warheads in military stockpiles has started rising again.](#)

What follows is the part that rarely gets printed: not just who has them, but how each one got them — because almost none of them built them alone, and several got there using material a friendly country handed over for peaceful use.

The Nine

Figures below are FAS total-inventory estimates as of early 2026.

United States — 1945 — roughly 5,042 warheads The Manhattan Project. Tested at Trinity in July 1945, then used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki the following month. Still the only country ever to use a nuclear weapon in war. [About 3,700 of those warheads are in the military stockpile; the rest are retired and awaiting dismantlement.](#)

Russia (USSR) — 1949 — roughly 5,420 warheads An indigenous program, enormously accelerated by espionage. Klaus Fuchs, Theodore Hall and others passed Manhattan Project design information to Moscow. The first Soviet device closely resembled the American implosion bomb. [Military stockpile: about 4,400 — the largest of the nine.](#)

United Kingdom — 1952 — roughly 225 warheads A Manhattan Project partner that was cut off by the American McMahon Act in 1946, and rebuilt the capability independently in response.

France — 1960 — roughly 370 warheads Built independently after being excluded from Anglo-American nuclear cooperation. Tested in the Algerian Sahara. France later provided the reactor and technical assistance that became Israel's program.

China — 1964 — roughly 620 warheads, expanding fastest of the nine Began with substantial Soviet assistance. Moscow withdrew its advisers during the Sino-Soviet split in 1959. China finished the job alone five years later.

India — 1974 test, 1998 weapons — roughly 190 warheads The plutonium for India's first device came from the CIRUS research reactor, supplied by Canada, using heavy water supplied by the United States — both provided for peaceful purposes. [Declassified files show the Nixon administration understood what was happening and that the program was built on that assistance.](#) India called the 1974 test a "peaceful nuclear explosion." It declared itself a weapons state after the 1998 tests. Never signed the NPT.

Pakistan — 1998 — roughly 170 warheads [A.Q. Khan, working at a URENCO enrichment facility in the Netherlands in the 1970s, took centrifuge designs home. Chinese assistance followed. Khan's network later sold nuclear technology onward to Libya, Iran and North Korea — the most extensive proliferation operation on record, and one Western intelligence services watched for years before acting. The State Department formally designated Khan and his associates for those activities.](#) Never signed the NPT.

North Korea — 2006 — roughly 60 warheads Began with a Soviet-supplied research reactor at Yongbyon in the 1960s. Joined the NPT in 1985, then withdrew in 2003 — the only country ever to do so — and tested three years later.

Israel — believed operational by 1967 — roughly 90 warheads Built at Dimona with extensive French assistance beginning in the late 1950s. Israel has never tested openly, never confirmed, and never denied. The policy is called *amimut* — opacity. Never signed the NPT. [Both FAS and SIPRI count Israel among the nine.](#)

The Rule and Who Wrote It

The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty recognizes exactly five states as legitimate nuclear weapons powers: the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China.

Those are the same five countries that hold permanent seats and veto power on the United Nations Security Council.

The treaty's logic was a bargain. The five would disarm over time; everyone else would forgo weapons in exchange for access to peaceful nuclear technology. Nearly every country on earth signed.

Three never did: India, Pakistan and Israel. All three built weapons. All three still have them. None faced war over it.

One signed and left: North Korea. It built weapons and has not been attacked.

[And on February 5, 2026, New START expired, leaving no treaty-bound limit on the strategic arsenals of the United States and Russia for the first time since 1972.](#)

The Ones Who Gave Them Up

This is the section that explains the most about how governments actually reason.

South Africa [built six nuclear devices in the 1980s, ended the program in 1989, and had dismantled all of them by September 1991. It acceded to the NPT in July 1991 and concluded a comprehensive IAEA safeguards agreement that September. It remains the only country to have built nuclear weapons and voluntarily given them up.](#)

Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan inherited Soviet weapons when the USSR collapsed. [Ukraine's inherited arsenal was the third largest on earth. Under the Budapest Memorandum, signed December 5, 1994, all three surrendered them in exchange for assurances from Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom to respect their independence and existing borders and to refrain from the threat or use of force against them. The memorandum's text is three pages long and is worth reading once.](#)

Russia seized Crimea in 2014 and invaded Ukraine in 2022.

Libya [disclosed and abandoned its clandestine weapons program in December 2003, admitted buying from the A.Q. Khan network, surrendered its documents, equipment and material, and opened itself to inspection. It signed an additional protocol in March 2004. The IAEA completed its verification work in 2008. Sanctions were lifted. Relations normalized. In 2011 a NATO air campaign helped bring down the government, and Muammar Gaddafi was killed by a militia in the street.](#)

Iraq [had its program dismantled under UN-mandated inspection after the 1991 war, with the IAEA completing most of its disarmament tasks by the end of 1992. It was invaded in March 2003 anyway, over weapons inspectors had found no evidence of.](#) Its head of state was executed.

Others who started and stopped: Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan and South Korea all pursued weapons programs and abandoned them, most under American pressure.

Who's Close Now

Iran — enriches uranium to 60 percent, the only non-nuclear-weapon state doing so. Has no weapon. Has been attacked twice over the program, in June 2025 and February 2026. [Iran stopped permitting JCPOA-mandated verification in February 2021, and after the June 2025 strikes the IAEA withdrew its inspectors entirely. On September 9, 2026, the IAEA Board of Governors voted to refer Iran to the UN Security](#)

[Council for the first time in twenty years, stating that the Agency cannot provide information about any of Iran's four declared enrichment facilities.](#)

Japan — holds a large stockpile of separated plutonium and a complete civilian fuel cycle. Widely assessed as capable of building a weapon within months if it chose. It has consistently chosen not to.

South Korea — ran a secret program in the 1970s and shut it down under American pressure. Public support for an independent deterrent has risen sharply in recent years.

Saudi Arabia — [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told CBS's 60 Minutes in March 2018: "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."](#)

The Pattern

Read the record as a government would read it.

Give them up, and you get the Budapest Memorandum and Ukraine. Or you get Libya in 2003 and Gaddafi in 2011.

Never have them, cooperate with inspectors, and you can still get Iraq in 2003.

Build them outside the treaty — India, Pakistan, Israel — and you are sanctioned for a while, then normalized, then courted.

Withdraw from the treaty and build them anyway, as North Korea did, and you are never attacked at all. Pyongyang has a leader Washington describes as unpredictable, one of the worst human rights records on earth, and no serious prospect of being bombed.

None of that makes proliferation safe. More nuclear-armed states means more chances for accident, theft, miscalculation and collapse — the standard objection, and a serious one. The nine have also never had fewer constraints on them than they do now, with New START expired and nothing negotiated to replace it.

But it does mean that when an Iranian official looks at this table, he is not being irrational.

He is reading it correctly.

Sources: Federation of American Scientists Nuclear Notebook; SIPRI Yearbook 2026; Arms Control Association; the National Security Archive at George Washington University; IAEA Board of Governors reporting. Warhead figures are open-source estimates and carry real uncertainty, particularly for Israel, North Korea and China. No state publishes a full accounting.

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