

# NIE Aftermath

By Khody Akhavi | December 10, 2007

A little over a week after a U.S. intelligence report concluded that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003, the sabre-rattling inside the Washington Beltway appears to have receded, and with it, the George W. Bush administration's strongest pretext for a military confrontation with Iran.

The judgments of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) contradicted findings in a similar 2005 report, which assessed that Iran was 10 years away from developing nuclear weapons. That report—the first major review since 2001 of what is known and what is unknown about Iran—also said Iran's military was conducting clandestine nuclear work and that if “left to its own devices, Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons.”

Critics of President Bush's Iran policy believe that the new intelligence estimate provides the rationale for a shift in the administration's stance on Tehran, away from confrontation and toward engagement.

The new NIE did not portray Iran as a rogue ideological state zealously questing for nuclear weapons, as many neoconservatives have fiercely argued, but rather a rational political actor whose “decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs.”

But the competition of dueling intelligence estimates is already underway, as is a battle for the integrity of the U.S. intelligence community, which has been harshly criticized for its failure to properly assess the WMD threat—or the lack thereof—in the lead-up to the Iraq War.

Former Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet called the 2002 NIE about Iraq's weapons programs “one of the lowest moments of my seven-year tenure.” The Iraq report relied heavily on information provided by a source called “Curveball,” an Iraqi chemical engineer later revealed as Rafid Ahmed Alwan, who had fed false information to German intelligence in exchange for asylum protection for him and his family. Germany did not trust him, but Alwan's claims eventually made it to Washington.

Critics argue that intelligence was also manipulated by policymakers within the Bush administration to justify a

U.S.-led invasion, and that neoconservatives are still trying to exert political control over the intelligence process.

“The last thing we need is more political input into intelligence matters. The facts are the facts, and it's time conservatives began to deal with the facts on the ground,” said Jon Wolfsthal, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, responding to the attempts to undermine the NIE's findings.

“The days of Doug Feith and Steve Cambone creating intelligence to suit their ideology are thankfully behind us,” he said.

Meanwhile, neoconservatives and former Bush officials have launched a ferocious counterattack on the NIE, and more pointedly at its authors, the intelligence officers.

“I must confess to suspecting that the intelligence community, having been excoriated for supporting the then-universal belief that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, is now bending over backward to counter what has up to now been a similarly universal view ... that Iran is hell-bent on developing nuclear weapons,” wrote Norman Podhoretz in the right-wing *Commentary* magazine.

“But I entertain an even darker suspicion. It is the intelligence community, which has for so many years now been leaking material calculated to undermine George W. Bush, is doing it again.”

In the opinion pages of the *Washington Post*, former U.S. envoy to the United Nations John R. Bolton was more pointed, accusing the NIE of being polluted by “refugees from the State Department” who were brought into the new central bureaucracy of the director of national intelligence, a position created in the response to the 9/11 Commission's assessment of U.S. intelligence failures. Bolton also criticized the intelligence community for engaging in “policy formulation” rather than “intelligence analysis,” and said that the new estimate was based on a

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bias given to new information that could not decisively negate all previous knowledge.

“It is a rare piece of intelligence that is so important it can conclusively or even significantly alter the body of already known information,” said Bolton. “Yet the bias toward the new appears to have exerted a disproportionate effect on intelligence analysis.”

Some experts have suggested that the new information involved the interception of a conversation between top Iranian military officials who were bitter over the Iranian leadership’s decision to halt its weapons program.

More importantly, the U.S. intelligence community’s belief that Iran was pursuing a covert nuclear weapons program up until 2003 was largely based on information contained in a laptop computer belonging to an Iranian engineer, said Jeffrey Lewis, the director of the nonproliferation Initiative at the Washington-based New America Foundation think-tank.

Lewis said that media outlets erroneously reported that the laptop, which the United States obtained in 2004 and which contained documents describing two Iranian nuclear programs, termed L-101 and L-102 by the Iranians, directly related to weapons work. He said it more specifically referred to modifications to a missile that would ostensibly carry a nuclear warhead.

“A lot of folks, myself included, have wondered about the reliability of the information. We’ve even taken to calling

it the ‘laptop of death,’” he said. But it was the crude manner in which the documents were constructed that gave Lewis pause.

“What led many of us to have serious doubts about it was how utterly unconnected from reality some of the information seemed. Some of the reports indicated that some of the view graphs were done in PowerPoint, which suggested to me that the program was not terribly sophisticated,” he said.

The report also seems to vindicate the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, but the NIE has been rejected by Israel, which claims that the Iranian nuclear weapons program is still running. And it appears that for the Bush White House, the NIE may not alter the course of its policy. “We’re dealing with a country that is still enriching uranium and remains a leading state sponsor of terrorism. That is a cause of great concern to the United States,” said Vice President Dick Cheney in remarks delivered Friday at the National World War I Museum. “Not everyone understands the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran or elsewhere but we and our allies do understand the threat and we have a duty to prevent it,” he said. Earlier in the week, Cheney expressed support for the estimate, saying that he had no reason to question “what the community has produced, with respect to the NIE on Iran.”

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*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

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