

The NIE Bombshell

By Gareth Porter | December 6, 2007

Despite the White House spin that the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) supports its policy of increasing pressure on Iran, the estimate not only directly contradicts the George W. Bush administration's line on Iranian intentions regarding nuclear weapons, but also points to a link between Tehran's 2003 decision to halt research on weaponization and its decision to negotiate with European foreign ministers on both nuclear and Iranian security concerns.

By using unusually strong and precise language in characterizing its pivotal judgment that Iran ended work related to nuclear weapons four years earlier, the estimate deals a serious blow to the administration's claim that Iran is determined to acquire nuclear weapons. The key judgment released Monday said: "We assess with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program [and] that the halt lasted at least several years."

The intelligence community also said for the first time in the new NIE: "[W]e do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons."

That judgment confirms what International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Mohammed ElBaradei and other close observers of the Iranian nuclear program have been saying since 2004: Iran is not interested in nuclear weapons but in the deterrent value inherent in the knowledge of mastering the nuclear fuel cycle.

The *Washington Post* revealed Tuesday that the White House had been briefed on the new evidence of the 2003 Iranian abandonment of weaponization as early as July 2006, and that White House officials had sharply challenged that evidence. According to an article by Dafna Linzer and Joby Warrick, "several of the president's top advisers" had argued that electronic intercepts of Iranian military officers, which were reportedly a key element of the new evidence, were part of a "clever Iranian deception campaign."

The White House intervention forced the intelligence analysts to endure months of defending their interpretation of the new data, according to Linzer and Warrick.

The Inter Press Service (IPS) reported in early November that the NIE had been originally completed in fall 2006 but that it had been rewritten three times, reflecting pressure from Vice President Dick Cheney (see "Stifling Dissent," November 12, 2007). The new revelations about White

House political intervention appear to represent a far more ambitious effort to alter the conclusions of the NIE than previously reported.

The new intelligence assessment increases the pressure on the Bush administration's effort to use the threat of possible military action against Iran and its diplomatic stance of insisting that Iran must agree to carry out the Security Council's demands for an end to its enrichment program before negotiations.

National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley acknowledged that many people would now be saying, "The problem is less bad than we thought."

In an effort to limit the damage to the Bush Iran policy from the estimate, Hadley argued Monday that it "suggests that the president has the right strategy: intensified international pressure along with a willingness to negotiate a solution."

The NIE does refer to the role of "international pressures" in halting Iran's program, but contrary to Hadley's argument, it suggests that the decision to halt weaponization was not prompted by threats and pressure. The key finding of the estimate also indicates that the intelligence community believes Iran is more likely to forego the nuclear weapons option if the United States deals with its security and political interests than if it relies on threats and sanctions.

The estimate concludes that the halt in the weapons program was ordered "in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work." That is a reference to the situation facing the Iranian leadership in 2003, when its acquisition of nuclear technology from the A.Q. Khan network had already been exposed but there was no threat of either military action or economic sanctions against Iran over the nuclear issue.

A major feature of the diplomatic situation in the fall of 2003 was the willingness of Britain, France, and Germany to negotiate an agreement with Iran on a wider range of security issues, based on voluntary Iranian suspension of uranium enrichment.

A fall 2004 speech by Hassan Rowhani, the moderate conservative secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, revealed that there had been sharp "differences of opinion" among Iranian leaders on the issue in fall 2003. Although Rowhani's speech did not refer to any weapons-related work, it did throw light on the basic political and strategic considerations being weighed by the Iranian national security elite in fall 2003.

Some conservatives were condemning the idea of cooperating with the IAEA and accepting its Additional Protocol, which would require much more intensive inspection of all nuclear sites, as "an act of treason," according to Rowhani.

They were also strongly opposed to trying to reach agreement with Britain, France, and Germany on a deal under which enrichment would be foregone in return for concessions to Iran on security issues.

The moderates, however, were ready to open up about their nuclear program to the IAEA and negotiate with the Europeans. They apparently believed that course required dropping whatever weapons-related research was underway.

Rowhani emphasized that continued secrecy about the nuclear program had become impossible, because the Libyans had told the United States everything about what he called the "middleman"—apparently a representative of the A.Q. Khan network—from which both Libya and Iran had acquired nuclear technology.

The signal event of that period was the agreement in Tehran on October 21, 2003 between the foreign ministers of Iran and the three European states. In the agreement, Iran renounced nuclear weapons, pledged to sign and begin ratification of the Additional Protocol, and

"voluntarily to suspend all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities as defined by the IAEA."

The three European foreign ministers pledged, in turn, to "cooperate with Iran to promote security and stability in the region, including the establishment of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East in accordance with the objectives of the United Nations."

The Bush administration had opposed the initiative of the "European Union Three" (EU-3) in offering a political agreement with Iran that would offer security and other concessions as part of a broader deal. The administration wanted to bring Iran quickly before the UN Security Council so that it would be subject to international sanctions.

Britain, France, and Germany reached an agreement with Iran in mid-November 2004 under which Iran pledged to "provide objective guarantees that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes," and the EU-3 promised "firm guarantees on nuclear, technological, and economic cooperation and firm commitments on security issues."

The EU-3 then began to backtrack from that agreement under pressure from Washington. But the new evidence that Iran made the decision to drop all weapons-related research at that time appears to confirm the correctness of the original European negotiating approach.

Paul Pillar, the former national intelligence officer for the Middle East who managed the 2005 NIE on the Iranian nuclear program and other NIEs on Iran, told IPS he considers it "plausible" that the decision to halt weapons-related work was part of a broader change in strategy that included a decision to enter into negotiations that promised security benefits in return for demonstrating restraint on enrichment.

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