

When Did He Know?

By Gareth Porter | December 19, 2007

White House officials have now admitted that George W. Bush was told that the intelligence assessment on a covert Iranian nuclear program might change last August, but they have avoided answering the question of when the president was first informed about the new intelligence that led to that revised assessment.

That evasion is necessary, it now appears, to conceal the fact that Bush likely knew about that intelligence as early as February or March 2007.

The White House evasions began on the day that the “key judgments” in the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran were released. At his December 3 press conference, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley was asked, “So was it recent weeks that this intelligence came in?” Hadley answered, “What the intelligence community has said is in the last few months.”

In fact, no intelligence official had commented on when the crucial intelligence had been first obtained.

Then a journalist asked, “Steve, when was the first time the president was given the inkling of something? ... Was this months ago, when the first information started to become available to intelligence agencies?” This time Hadley responded, “You ought to go back to the intelligence community.”

The evidence now available strongly suggests, however, that Hadley dodged the question not because he did not know the answer, but because he did not wish to reveal that Bush had been informed about the new intelligence months before the August meeting with Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell.

The key development that altered the course of the NIE on Iran, according to intelligence sources, was the defection of a senior official of the Iranian Ministry of Defense, Ali Reza Asgari, on a visit to Turkey last February, as widely reported in international news media in subsequent weeks. The *Washington Post*'s Dafna Linzer, citing a “senior U.S. official,” reported on March 8 that Asgari, who had been deputy minister of defense for eight years under the reformist President Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005, was already providing information to U.S. intelligence.

The senior official told Linzer, however, that Asgari was not being questioned about Iran's nuclear program, despite the fact that Asgari certainly had significant

knowledge of policy decisions, if not technical details, of the nuclear program. That incongruous denial that Asgari had anything to say about Iran's nuclear program suggested that the information being provided by Asgari on that subject was considered extraordinarily sensitive.

Intelligence officials have kept any reference to Asgari out of the discussion of the NIE. Former CIA officer Philip Giraldi has told the Inter Press Service (IPS), however, that, according to intelligence sources, information provided by Asgari was indeed a “key component” of the intelligence community's conclusion that Iran ended its nuclear weapons-related work in 2003, although it was corroborated by other sources.

Giraldi says Asgari had been recruited by Turkish intelligence in 2003 and defected to Turkey after he picked up indications that Iranian intelligence had become suspicious of him. Giraldi said his sources confirm press reports that Asgari came out with “bags of documents.” Intelligence officials have confirmed that papers on military discussions of the nuclear program were part of the evidence that led the analysts to the new conclusion about the Iranian nuclear program.

Equally important to the NIE's conclusion, according to Giraldi, was the information provided by Asgari about the Iranian defense communications system that allowed U.S. intelligence to gain new access to sensitive communications within the Iranian military. That was crucial to the intercepted electronic communications that also played a role in the analysis that led to the estimate's conclusion.

Gary Sick, who was the principal White House aide on Iran during the Carter administration and is now a senior research scholar at the Middle East Institute of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, says he believes Asgari's knowledge of the debate in Tehran's defense establishment also may have allowed the intelligence community to identify which intercepted communications were most important.

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“There are zillions of pieces of evidence, and what you look for is defined by what you know,” says Sick. “What Asgari gave them was a new way of looking at the evidence.”

There are other indications that, by April 2007, the intelligence community was already intensively reviewing new evidence provided by Asgari and old evidence that the new information suggested could corroborate it. Thomas Fingar, chair of the National Intelligence Council, who was directing the whole NIE process, gave an exclusive interview to NPR’s Mary Louise Kelly on April 27, in which he dropped hints of the new phase of the NIE process.

Fingar referred to “some new information we have” and declared, “We are serious about reexamining old evidence.” Fingar even said that the estimated time frame for Iran’s obtaining a nuclear weapon “might change,” because “we are being completely open-minded and taking a fresh look at the subject.”

It now seems clear that these were references to the search for corroboration of the basic intelligence obtained from Asgari about the Iranian nuclear program. But Fingar misled listeners about the direction of the intelligence community’s investigation by seeming to suggest that advances in Iranian uranium enrichment announced earlier that month might cause analysts to shorten the minimum time frame within which Iran might have sufficient fissile material for a bomb.

Fingar said the evidence that Iran was beginning to enrich on an “industrial scale” was “one of the questions we have got to weigh the new information to see what it does to our judgment.” He also referred to International Atomic Energy Agency reports on the Iranian program, allowing listeners to infer that the delay in the NIE was due to new evidence that would lead to a more alarmist estimate on Iran’s nuclear program.

The Fingar interview suggests that the process of seeking corroboration of the 2003 change in nuclear policy in Iran was already well under way in April.

The intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program obtained as a result of the U.S. debriefing of Asgari, however, would have been made available to Bush as soon as it was evaluated as important by the intelligence officials. The debriefing of a high-ranking defector represents very important intelligence, and summaries of the most important information from such a debriefing would normally go into the Presidential Daily Brief (PDB), the summary of key intelligence developments that is prepared by the CIA each night and given to the White House the first thing the next morning.

“It is inconceivable to me that the PDB did not include whatever information Asgari gave us on the nuclear program,” says Ray McGovern, a 26-year veteran of CIA who once presented the daily briefing to Richard Nixon. Furthermore, every major new development in the collection of intelligence obtained as a result of Asgari’s debriefings would have been included in the PDB, according to McGovern.

Contrary to Hadley’s suggestion that he didn’t know when Bush had first gotten the new intelligence, moreover, McGovern points out that the national security adviser has gotten the same PDB as the president for decades. The former CIA analyst told IPS that Hadley certainly would have known when the new intelligence regarding the covert Iranian nuclear weapons program was presented to the president.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist, writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, was published in June 2005.

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