

# Cables Hold Clues to U.S.-Iran Mysteries

**From the Archive:** As the West's confrontation with Iran grows more dangerous and major U.S. news outlets blame Iran it may be worth recalling the documents that revealed how the U.S. and its allies showed bad faith in talks with Iran about its nuclear program, as Robert Parry reported in 2010.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Nov. 29, 2010)

Classified U.S. diplomatic cables from WikiLeaks show that the Obama administration, like its predecessors, has played a double game with Iran's Shiite government, mixing public offers of reconciliation with secret collaboration on hard-line strategies favored by Iran's Sunni Arab rivals and Israel.

The classified cables also make clear that the major U.S. news media was mistaken in dumping the blame on Iran for the failed negotiations in 2009 and 2010 seeking a swap of some Iranian low-enriched uranium for nuclear isotopes. The cables reveal that those U.S. gestures were, in part, calculated to fail and thus to justify harsher sanctions against Iran.

According to the cables, key oil sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf were alarmed at comments from the newly elected President Barack Obama advocating a "new beginning" between the United States and Iran, including substantive negotiations on its nuclear program.

The United Arab Emirates deemed Obama's reconciliation offers "confusing" and the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia said Obama's position "fueled Saudi fears that a new U.S. administration might strike a 'grand bargain' [with Iran] without prior consultations."

European governments also expressed misgivings about ambiguities in Obama's position, prompting the new administration to dispatch Daniel Glaser, acting assistant secretary of the Treasury for terrorist financing and financial crimes, to a meeting in Brussels, Belgium, on March 2 and 3, 2009, involving many of Europe's top Middle East experts.

Glaser explained that Obama's "engagement" strategy with Iran was only the velvet glove covering an iron fist. "'Engagement' alone is unlikely to succeed," Glaser told the meeting, suggesting the overtures were merely necessary steps to justify a more aggressive strategy. Referring to the short time window for any talks, he added, "time was not on our side."

The experts got Glaser's message. "Iran needs to fear the stick and feel a light

'tap' now," said Robert Cooper, a senior European Union official. The cable added, "Glaser agreed, noting the stick could escalate beyond financial measures under a worst case scenario."

So, even as the Obama administration was discussing a possible swap of Iranian low-enriched uranium, it was pressing ahead with plans to enlist the world community, including Iranian trading partners China and Russia, in a new round of sanctions.

The leaked cables show that China was swayed by promises that Saudi Arabia would replace any oil from a possible Iranian cutoff, and Russia was brought onboard by Obama's agreement to move a ballistic missile defense site from Poland and the Czech Republic to a ship-based system targeted on Iran.

By early 2010, both China and Russia had agreed not to exercise their UN Security Council vetoes to stop new sanctions against Iran. A January 2010 cable reported that a Russian official had "indicated Russia's willingness to move to the pressure track." [New York Times, Nov. 29, 2010]

### **Derailing a Uranium Swap**

Meanwhile, Iran's internal dissension had complicated an agreement on a low-enriched uranium swap. Though the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad embraced the idea in fall 2009, agreeing to give up about half of Iran's low-enriched uranium to get nuclear isotopes for medical research, some of his political opponents favored by the West attacked the proposed deal.

When Ahmadinejad's government sought some modifications on how the uranium would be transferred, the Obama administration dismissed any changes and the major U.S. news media jumped on Ahmadinejad for supposedly renegeing on the original agreement.

The leaked cables, however, shed new light on what was actually occurring. The Obama administration wasn't really committed to the swap idea as much as it was using the appearance of negotiations to set the stage for a new round of sanctions. The moves by Iran's internal opposition to torpedo the deal also look different in this context, as possibly a tactic to help the West isolate Ahmadinejad's government.

In spring 2010, Ahmadinejad agreed to another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. However, that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, considered a hawk on Iran, and was mocked by leading U.S. news outlets, including the New York Times and the Washington Post.

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey as bumbling understudies on the world stage continued even after Brazil released Obama's private letter to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal. Despite the letter's release, Obama didn't publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal.

Much like during the run-up to war with Iraq, opinion leaders at the New York Times and Washington Post eagerly beat the drums for another confrontation.

A New York Times editorial praised the new round of anti-Iran sanctions from the UN, but complained they "do not go far enough." The Times also took another swipe at Brazil and Turkey, which voted against the new sanctions from their temporary seats on the Security Council.

"The day's most disturbing development was the two no votes in the Security Council from Turkey and Brazil," the Times wrote. "Both are disappointed that their efforts to broker a nuclear deal with Iran didn't go far. Like pretty much everyone else, they were played by Tehran."

Though this Times point of view fits with neocon orthodoxy that any reasonable move toward peace and away from confrontation is a sign of naivete and weakness the fact is that the Iran-Turkey-Brazil deal was torpedoed by the United States, after Obama had encouraged it. This wasn't a case of the two countries being "played by Tehran."

The documents just released by Wikileaks underscore this point. The Obama administration was using the appearance of engagement as a means for neutralizing opposition to its plans for another escalation of tensions in the Middle East.

### **A Loose Coalition**

The cables also make clear that Israel and the Sunni oil sheikdoms had formed into a loose anti-Iran coalition pushing for more aggressive U.S. policies toward the Shiite-ruled country.

In late 2009, one cable reported that the king of Bahrain told U.S. officials that Iran's nuclear program "must be stopped," adding that "the danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it."

According to another cable, Saudi King Abdullah urged the United States to "cut off the head of the snake" before it was too late.

However, such alarmist rhetoric from the region's oil sheikdoms regarding Iran is nothing new. The Saudis and other Persian Gulf states have been demanding

stern action against Iran and decrying alleged U.S. softness since Islamists overthrew the autocratic Shah of Iran in 1979.

Some of those warnings were contained in other classified U.S. cables that came out in an unauthorized fashion, in that case from the Iranian student militants who seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, after the Carter administration permitted the deposed Shah into the United States for cancer treatment.

Playing on America's Cold War fears, Saudi leaders warned that the Islamic government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would soon give way to a communist takeover.

"Developments in Iran could be seen as an example of U.S. seeming indifference or impotence," Saudi Prince Fahd complained to visiting Carter administration officials. "Instead of pressuring the shah into bringing his thoughts and actions up to date so as to pull the rug out from under the communist agitators, you let him go."

Fahd predicted that this communist success in Iran would spread across the Middle East and threaten Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich sheikdoms.

"Shortly, perhaps within a few months, Khomeini will be out and Iran will become another Ethiopia, ruled by communists placed there by Moscow," Fahd warned.

The cable continued, "The crown prince regretted that the United States did nothing to counter the communist threat in the region. Fahd further noted that Iran was threatening Bahrain, Kuwait, and other Arab countries of the Gulf. There had, however, not been a word of caution to Iran from President Carter to reassure not only weak countries, like Bahrain, but also America's other friends in the area and around the world."

Of course, the Saudi fears of a communist wave tossing out Khomeini and then rolling across the oil-rich Middle East never materialized. Three decades later, the Islamist government of Iran remains largely intact, threatened mostly by dissidents who favor only a modestly less religious political system.

### **Calling in a Debt**

In 1979, the greater danger to the sheikdoms came not from communism but from the ascetic lifestyles of Khomeini and Iran's other theocratic rulers, which contrasted with the playboy opulence of the Saudis and other royal families from the region.

In effect, a nervous Fahd was calling due the post-World War II American

commitment to protect the security of the Persian Gulf sheikdoms in exchange for reasonably priced oil. One secret State Department cable, dated July 5, 1979, bluntly explained the point: "Oil for security is still the essence of the special relationship" with the Saudis.

The new cables from WikiLeaks add a few insights into how Iran was contained in those years after the revolution, largely by the military intervention of Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

According to one of those cables, in December 2005, Saudi King Abdullah lashed out at George W. Bush's administration for ignoring his warnings against invading Iraq in 2003, noting that the new Iraqi government was dominated by Shiites with close ties to Iran.

"Whereas in the past the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Saddam Hussein had agreed on the need to contain Iran, U.S. policy had now given Iraq to Iran as a 'gift on a golden platter,'" the U.S. Embassy cable quoted the king as complaining.

Abdullah's comment offered a glimpse into the Realpolitik that has been played for generations in the oil-rich region.

A "top secret" U.S. document that I uncovered in congressional files in 1994 claimed that according to senior Middle East leaders even President Jimmy Carter, the renowned peacemaker, engaged in this ruthless big-power politics.

The document, a two-page "Talking Points" prepared by Secretary of State Alexander Haig for a briefing of President Reagan, recounted Haig's first trip to the Middle East in April 1981.

In the report, Haig wrote that he was impressed with "bits of useful intelligence" that he had learned. "Both [Egypt's Anwar] Sadat and [Saudi Prince] Fahd [explained that] Iran is receiving military spares for U.S. equipment from Israel," Haig reported.

This fact might have been less surprising to Reagan, whose intermediaries allegedly had collaborated with Israeli officials in 1980 and early 1981 to smuggle weapons to Iran behind President Carter's back. [For details, see Robert Parry's Secrecy & Privilege.]

But Haig followed that comment with another stunning assertion: "It was also interesting to confirm that President Carter gave the Iraqis a green light to launch the war against Iran through Fahd."

### **Questions about Carter**

In other words, according to Haig's information, Saudi Prince Fahd (later King

Fahd) claimed that Carter, apparently hoping to strengthen the U.S. hand in the Middle East and desperate to pressure Iran over the stalled hostage talks, gave clearance to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.

Haig's written report contained no other details about the "green light," and Haig declined my subsequent requests for an interview about the Talking Points. But the paper represented the first documented corroboration of Iran's long-held belief that the United States had encouraged Iraq's 1980 invasion.

In 1980, President Carter termed those Iranian charges of U.S. complicity "patently false." Later, he mentioned Iraq's invasion only briefly in his presidential memoir, in the context of an unexpected mid-September hostage initiative from a Khomeini in-law, Sadeq Tabatabai.

"Exploratory conversations [in Germany] were quite encouraging," President Carter wrote about that approach, but he added: "As fate would have it, the Iraqis chose the day of [Tabatabai's] scheduled arrival in Iran, September 22, to invade Iran and to bomb the Tehran airport. Typically, the Iranians accused me of planning and supporting the invasion."

The Iraqi invasion did make Iran more desperate to get U.S. spare parts for its air and ground forces. Yet the Carter administration continued to demand that the American hostages be freed before military shipments could resume. The Republicans around Ronald Reagan were more accommodating to Iran, apparently beginning during Campaign 1980.

Secret FBI wiretaps revealed that an Iranian banker, the late Cyrus Hashemi, who supposedly was helping President Carter on the hostage talks, actually was assisting Republicans with arms shipments to Iran and with money transfers in fall 1980.

Hashemi's older brother, Jamshid, testified in the early 1990s that the Iran arms shipments, via Israel, resulted from secret meetings in Madrid between Reagan's campaign director, William J. Casey, and one of Khomeini's emissaries, a hard-line Islamic mullah named Mehdi Karrubi. (Today, Karrubi now considered a "reformer" is a leader of Iran's political opposition which lodged strong objections to the uranium-swap proposal in 2009.)

Whatever the full truth about the 1980 back-channel maneuvers known as the October Surprise mystery there's no doubt that the Reagan administration did arrange for secret shipments of sophisticated U.S. missiles and other weapons to Iran during the 1980s. When disclosed in 1986, those deals became the center of the Iran-Contra scandal.

It was also discovered in the late 1980s that the Reagan administration had been

secretly providing military support to Iraq as well.

The Iran-Iraq War raged on for more than eight years, killing and maiming an estimated one million people. The economic dislocations also set the stage for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 over a dispute regarding Iraq's war debt.

The subsequent U.S.-led military campaign to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 placed U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, infuriating Islamists such as Saudi Osama bin Laden, who vowed to drive American forces out of Islamic lands by attacking U.S. military and civilian targets.

That led to the 9/11 terror attacks and to George W. Bush's invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003.

The new cables from WikiLeaks indicate that the Obama administration now has taken its place in a long line of U.S. governments trying its hand at complicated and often misguided strategies for power and influence in the oil-rich Middle East.

**[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]**

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.**

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