

# Hillary Revives Dubious Iran Charge

U.S. hardliners on Iran keep making their case, ratcheting up the pressure for sterner and sterner action against Iran's nuclear program. But some of the claims though accepted by the major American news media have dubious origins, as Gareth Porter reported for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's charge this week that Iran had intended to keep the Fordow nuclear site near Qom secret until it was revealed by Western intelligence revived a dubious claim the Barack Obama administration made in September 2009.

Clinton said Iran "only declared the Qom facility to the IAEA after it was discovered by the international community following three years of covert construction." She also charged that there is no "plausible reason" for Iran to enrich to a 20 percent level at the Fordow plant, implying that the only explanation is an intent to make nuclear weapons.

Clinton's charges were part of a coordinated U.S.-British P.R. attack on Iran's enrichment at Fordow. British Foreign Minister William Hague also argued that Fordow is too small to support a civilian power program. Hague also referred to its "location and clandestine nature," saying they "raise serious questions about its ultimate purpose."

The Clinton-Hague suggestions that the Fordow site must be related to an effort to obtain nuclear weapons appear to be aimed at counterbalancing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's statement only two days earlier that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons.

The Clinton and Hague statements recalled a briefing for reporters during the Pittsburgh G20 summit meeting on Sept. 25, 2009, at which a "senior administration official" asserted that Iran had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency about the Fordow site in a Sept. 21 letter only after it had "learned that the secrecy of the facility was compromised".

That administration claim was quickly accepted by major Western media outlets without any investigation of the facts. That story line is so deeply entrenched in media consciousness that even before Clinton's remarks, Reuters and Associated Press had published reports from their Vienna correspondents that repeated the official Obama administration line that Iran had revealed the Fordow site only after Western intelligence had discovered it.

But the administration never offered the slightest evidence to support that assertion, and there is one major reason for doubting it: the United States did not inform the IAEA about any nuclear facility at Fordow until three days after Iran's Sept. 21, 2009, formal letter notifying the IAEA of the Fordow enrichment facility, because the administration couldn't be certain that it was a nuclear site.

Mohammed ElBaradei, then director general of the IAEA, reveals in his 2011 memoir that Robert Einhorn, the State Department's special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, informed him on Sept. 24 about U.S. intelligence on the Fordow site three days after the Iranian letter had been received.

An irritated ElBaradei demanded to know why he had not been told before the Iranian letter. Einhorn responded that the United States "had not been sure of the nature of the facility," ElBaradei wrote.

The administration's claim that Iran announced the site because it believed U.S. intelligence had "identified it" was also belied by a set of questions and answers issued by the Obama administration on the same day as the press briefing. The answer it provided to the question, "Why did the Iranians decide to reveal this facility at this time," was "We do not know."

Greg Thielmann, who was a top official in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research until 2003 and was on the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence during the 2009 episode, told IPS the evidence for the claim that Iran believed the site had been discovered was "all circumstantial."

Analysts were suspicious of the Iranian letter to the IAEA, Thielmann said, because "it had the appearance of something put together hurriedly."

But there is an alternative explanation: the decision to reveal the existence of a second prospective enrichment site this one built into the side of a mountain appears to have reflected the need to strengthen Iran's hand in a meeting with the "P5 + 1" group of states led by the United States that was only 10 days away.

The Iranian announcement that it would participate in the meeting on Sept. 14, 2009, came on the same day that the head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, warned against an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The idea that Iran was planning to enrich uranium secretly at Fordow assumes that the Iranians were not aware that U.S. intelligence had been carrying out aerial surveillance of the site for years. That is hardly credible in light of the fact that the Mujahideen-E-Khalq (MEK), the armed opposition group with links to both U.S. and Israeli intelligence, had drawn attention to the Fordow

site in a December 2005 press conference well before it had been selected for a second enrichment plant.

The MEK had also revealed the first Iranian enrichment site at Natanz in an August 2002 press conference, which had been the kickoff for the George W. Bush administration's propaganda campaign charging Iran had maintained a covert nuclear program since the 1980s.

But when the MEK identified the Natanz facility, Iran's only commitment under its safeguards agreement with the IAEA was to inform the agency of any new nuclear facility 180 days before the introduction of nuclear material. That date was then still far in the future.

In November 2003, the Bush administration engineered the passage of a resolution at the IAEA Governing Board meeting condemning Iran for "18 years of covert nuclear activity." In fact, Iran had announced openly in 1982 that it intended to have the capability to convert yellowcake into reactor fuel. In 1983, Iran asked the IAEA to help it build a pilot plant for uranium enrichment, but the U.S. government intervened to prevent the agency from doing so.

It was that U.S. political interference that forced Iran to purchase black market centrifuge technology from the A.Q. Khan network in 1987. But Iran openly negotiated with China, Argentina and six other governments for the purchase of nuclear energy and facilities in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite those well-known facts, the Bush administration charge that Iran had operated a "clandestine nuclear program" for "18 years" quickly became an accepted fact inserted in many stories by major newspapers such the Washington Post, New York Times and Los Angeles Times.

In asserting that there was "no plausible justification" for Iran's enrichment to 20 percent, Clinton sought to refute Iran's explanation that the 20-percent enrichment is supply fuel for its Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). "The P5+1 has offered alternatives for providing fuel for the TRR," Clinton said.

The proposal made by the P5+1 in 2009, however, was explicitly aimed at stripping Iran of the bulk of its stock of low-enriched uranium a prospect that was widely criticized even among critics of President Mahmoud Ahmadenijad, including Mir Hossein Mousavi, his rival in the contested June 2009 presidential election. The main reason for the resistance to the proposal appears to have been that Iran would have been deprived of its bargaining chips in relation to eventual negotiations with the United States.

When Iran agreed to a joint Brazilian-Turkish proposal for a swap in June 2010, the Obama administration rejected it, because it left Iran with too much low

enriched uranium. It was after that rejection that Iran vowed to enrich uranium to 20 percent unless it obtained a supply through other means.

Iran also demonstrated at the 2011 IAEA Governing Board meeting that it was working on producing its own fuel plates for the TRR, according to former IAEA nuclear inspector Robert Kelley.

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## Sarkozy Pushes Tax on Stock Trading

As Wall Street bankers and hedge funds deploy powerful computers in “high-frequency trading” siphoning off capital meant for productive purposes one counter-measure would be a “financial transaction tax” to discourage the practice and raise needed revenue, a plan gaining traction in France, reports Jeff Cohen.

By Jeff Cohen

With U.S. media obsessing on the fight here at home among conservatives vying to become president, most of them missed some big news from France, which already has a conservative president. French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that he would take the lead even go it alone within Europe, if need be in introducing and pushing a Financial Transaction Tax in his country.

That’s right the *conservative* president of France wants to tax the financial traders and speculators. Referring to the tax as a “moral issue” and blaming deregulation and speculation for the global economic meltdown, Sarkozy has said that traders must “repay for the damage they have caused.”

What does it tell us about U.S. politics that the conservative president of France on this issue and others is way to the left of President Barack Obama? The U.S. president has not publicly promoted a Wall Street transaction tax (even though U.S. financial institutions, not the French, were largely responsible for the global crisis).

Sometimes called a “Robin Hood tax,” a Financial Transaction Tax is endorsed worldwide by everyone from conservative European leaders to the Pope and

Archbishop of Canterbury to Bill Gates and Ralph Nader. The tax is tiny per transaction and would barely be felt by middle-class investors or their pensions or 401(k)'s, but it could raise big bucks from high-volume investors and impose a brake on the kind of speculation that tanked the world's economy.

French President Sarkozy keeps explaining to the people of France and Europe that a small transaction tax raises billions for countries facing deficits. Wouldn't it be something if President Obama went to the American people with such a deficit proposal, instead of putting Medicare on the chopping block?

President Sarkozy invokes the "moral issue" of financial institutions repairing the damage they caused. What a shock it would be to see President Obama aiming the "moral issue" at Wall Street profiteers and demanding repair of damage, instead of rewarding them with top White House jobs.

After failing to get resistant allies among European countries to join him, Sarkozy is going forward on his own declaring: "If France waits for others to tax finance, then finance will never be taxed." [British officials have been particularly resistant to the tax because they fear it would put a crimp in the freewheeling trading practices of the London exchange.]

Can you imagine Obama standing up to a resistant Congress on a Wall Street transaction tax? He can't even stand up to his own advisers on the issue, according to Ron Suskind's insider book on the Obama White House, *Confidence Men*. Suskind reported that Obama briefly embraced the tax and declared at one meeting: "We are going to do this!" But after Obama's top economic adviser (and Wall Streeter) Larry Summers criticized the tax, the idea was buried at the White House.

That was back in 2009. But the idea is still alive among some Democrats on Capitol Hill. A couple months ago, Sen. Tom Harkin and Rep. Peter DeFazio introduced a Financial Transaction Tax bill in Congress that would easily raise \$350 billion over 10 years. Rep. John Conyers introduced a similar bill last year it would tax Wall Street to fund federal jobs programs.

A Wall Street transaction tax is backed by National Nurses United and other unions. It's popular with the U.S. public, and would be even more popular if Obama were to campaign for it in 2012. RootsAction.org has gained 50,000 signatures in support of the tax. You can add your name here to those pushing Obama to (re)embrace the Wall Street tax.

And don't get me wrong about President Sarkozy of France. He's no great humanitarian. But he is facing an uphill reelection battle this year and the conservative president understands how popular a financial tax is with voters.

Facing reelection this year, maybe it's time President Obama came to that same understanding.

**Jeff Cohen is co-founder of RootsAction.org, author of Cable News Confidential, and founder of the media watch group FAIR.**

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## Neocons Dream Up Scary Iran Scenarios

As American neocons continue to walk the United States toward another war in the Middle East, this time with Iran, they have been laboring to come up with rationales, including alarmist scenarios of what a nuclear-armed Iran might do geopolitically, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The alarmism about the prospect of Iran developing a nuclear weapon is unmatched by any comparably intense attention to exactly why such a possibility is supposedly so dire.

Among the voluminous opinion pieces, panel discussions, campaign rhetoric and miscellaneous outcries on facets of this subject, one could search in vain for any detailed analysis of just what difference the advent of an Iranian nuke would make. Most of the discourse on the topic simply seems to take as a given, not needing any analysis, that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be so bad that to prevent it warrants considering even extreme measures.

Recently Ash Jain of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy produced what appears to fill this gap. His monograph, titled "Nuclear Weapons and Iran's Global Ambitions: Troubling Scenarios," is, at least on the face of it, a serious effort to analyze the regional and global consequences of Iranian nuclear weapons.

It is the most extensive consideration of this question I have seen from anyone who clearly believes that an Iranian nuke would be very bad. As such, Jain deserves credit for taking this stab at the subject. As a serious, extensive effort, his paper can be taken as demonstrating the limits of any case about the dangers of Iranian nuclear weapons.

Jain begins by stacking the deck in describing the Iranian objectives that presumably would underlie any use to which the Iranians would put a nuclear capability. Nuclear weapons in the hands of a "pragmatic regime" driven

primarily by “a desire to protect and deter outside attack” would be far different, he says, from their possession by an “ideological regime,” which is the label he pins on Iran.

This is consistent with much of the alarmist rhetoric, which depicts the Iranian regime as somehow fundamentally different from most governments in how it thinks and operates and what it aspires to. But what exactly defines an “ideological regime” and distinguishes it from a “pragmatic regime”?

There is plenty of ideology floating around, some of which has significant implications for foreign policy and international security, and the more one thinks about it, the more one realizes that the regime in Tehran isn't so different after all.

This example ought to be too obvious to need pointing out, but we recently had a government right here in Washington that got so influenced by an ideology (in this case, the neoconservative kind) that it launched a major offensive war of choice thousands of miles away, at much cost and misery to the United States. Is this what Jain means by an “ideological regime”?

Jain allows that “some analysts” see the Iranian regime, like many other regimes, concerned with its own survival and with deterring and preventing hostile actions from those who have given it good reason to be perceived as threats, in this case, Israel or the United States. Then he dismisses this view in a single sentence as “inconsistent not only with Iranian activities on the ground but with the longstanding public statements of its own leaders.”

But he never actually addresses the record of Iranian activities on the ground. That record in fact shows a lot of pragmatism and even caution.

Jain does go on to quote at length the public statements of Iranian leaders, to depict an Iran driven by revolutionary and aggressive objectives, but does not weigh any of this rhetoric against the fundamental interests of defense and survival. He also does not distinguish between what is merely rhetoric or political blather for domestic or international purposes and what represents genuine, active objectives of the Islamic Republic.

None of this, however, is what is most significant about Jain's paper and what it demonstrates about the limits of argumentation about an Iranian nuclear weapon supposedly being a dire threat. Jain does not fall back on the familiar but crude notion of Iranian leaders as a bunch of mad mullahs who are irrational, cannot be deterred and cannot be trusted not to push the launch button for any crazy reason.

Instead Jain takes the more sophisticated approach one more often hears in

discussions of this subject among policy elites: that the real danger of an Iranian nuke is not that Tehran would launch a nuclear bolt out of the blue but instead that such capability would somehow lead to other forms of aggressive or dangerous Iranian behavior.

The Iran he depicts is not an irrational actor but instead a very calculating one that pursues an assortment of regional and global objectives. And so most of Jain's paper is a scenario-by-scenario rendition of all kinds of nastiness that Iran could conceivably perpetrate, either within its own region or farther field.

The possibilities discussed run from strong-arming Persian Gulf states to reduce the U.S. military presence in the region to expanding a strategic relationship with Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. All of these scenarios are put under the heading "Iran as a Nuclear Weapons State". And each scenario has a subsection titled "Impact of a Nuclear Capability."

But here's the main thing to notice: nowhere is there any explanation of exactly *how* and *why* a nuclear capability would make a difference in Iranian behavior. The most that Jain can offer is to assert several times that because Iran would be "shielded by a nuclear weapons capability" it might do thus-and-so. We never get an explanation of exactly how such a shield should be expected to work.

The scenarios are basically just a spinning out of an assortment of things one could imagine Iran doing, some of which have some relationship to things Iran is already doing and some of which are only flights of fancy. Nuclear weapons play hardly any role in these products of imagination.

In this respect Jain's approach is again typical of most of the ringing of the Iranian nuclear alarm bell one hears in sophisticated policy advocacy. The idea is that armed with a nuke, Iran would somehow become more aggressive and troublesome because it would be feeling its oats. (Jain doesn't use this phrase, but I have heard others arguing in the same direction use exactly those words.) The argument really is that vague.

If one is to get beyond arguments that are as mushy as oatmeal and to try to put together a more rigorous analysis, several things would be required to conclude that the advent of a nuclear weapon would change Iranian behavior. One is that there is something Tehran wants to do and sees it as in its interest to do but, as a non-nuclear-weapons state, is not doing now.

Second, the reason Iran is not doing that behavior now is that someone else is holding over its head a threat of retribution or retaliation if it were to indulge in the behavior. Third, the other party would no longer wield such a



threat if Iran had a nuclear weapon, and the reason it no longer would wield the threat is that it considers it credible that Iran would escalate to the nuclear level whatever matter is in dispute.

I have thought hard to come up with plausible scenarios that meet these requirements and have been unable to do so. The last requirement, about credibility of escalation to the nuclear level, is especially hard to meet. I have not heard from anyone else any plausible scenarios that meet these requirements either.

Applying this kind of rigor to Jain's scenarios reveals how inapplicable a change in Iran's nuclear status would be to any of them. To take one example in which he endeavors to mention nuclear weapons beyond the general "shield" notion, he talks about Hizballah and Hamas possibly becoming more emboldened because Iran might extend a nuclear umbrella to these groups.

So in the face of Israel's overwhelming nuclear superiority, Iranian decision-makers would be willing to risk Tehran to save Gaza? Could Tehran expect anyone to believe that? Another of Jain's scenarios, which is to create in league with Venezuela a latter-day version of the Cuban missile crisis, stretches credibility even more.

The crude and sophisticated versions of the alarm-ringing are not all that different, because the sophisticated version ultimately depends on the credibility of Iranian leaders, under certain circumstances, actually pushing that launch button.

Jain concedes that "the United States might succeed in deterring Iran's use of nuclear weapons, as well as direct military aggression against its allies" but contends that the intimidation, subversion and other behaviors he discusses "could pose a greater challenge." The fatal flaw in the argument is that if the use of nuclear weapons is not credible because it is deterred, than the mere possession of such a weapon is strategically incapable of shielding other behavior.

A presentation such as Jain's, given all the extensive scenario-building involving a wide variety of things that most of us can agree we would not like to see Iran do, coupled with the window-dressing about "impact of a nuclear capability," can create the impression that a lot of awful stuff could really happen as a result of Iran getting a nuclear weapon.

But take a second look, bearing in mind that the issue is not how many unpleasant things we can conceive of Iran doing, but rather what *difference* a nuclear capability would make in its ability or inclination to do those things,

and there isn't really any substance there.

One should also note how much all of this type of argumentation is not a matter of what is probable but instead only of what is possible and what Iran "could" do. (Sounds a lot like all that war-selling rhetoric about what Saddam Hussein "could" do with his presumed weapons of mass destruction, doesn't it?)

Jain is not being deceptive; he duly acknowledges that he is dwelling in the realm of mere possibilities. But we ought to keep this in mind when we get to what we all know this is eventually about. "At some point," says Jain in his conclusion, "the costs and risks of more coercive options, including military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, may have to be weighed against the costs and risks of allowing Iran to obtain a nuclear capability."

Indeed, let there be such a weighing. And when such a weighing is done, let the same standards for assessing costs and risks be applied to the coercive options as are applied to an Iranian nuclear capability.

If assessment of the costs and risks of militarily attacking Iran ranged as fancifully far into mere possibilities and bad things that "could" happen as do the discussions in Jain's paper and elsewhere of the costs and risks of an Iranian nuke, then the consequences to U.S. interests of a resort to military force would be seen to be not just very bad but horrendous.

Meanwhile, Jain deserves compliments for making perhaps the most extensive attempt I have seen to construct an argument about the hazards of an Iranian nuclear weapon. As such, his paper enables us to see just what such an argument consists of. No real shield or anything else substantial. Just some oats.

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