

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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