

Satellite Photos of Iran Doubted

Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell cited satellite photos allegedly revealing WMD stockpiles, but the proof proved bogus. Now, similar claims are justifying a war with Iran, but the “evidence” again is speculative at best, Gareth Porter writes for the Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

News stories about satellite photographs suggesting efforts by Iran to “sanitize” a military site that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has said may have been used to test nuclear weapons have added yet another layer to widely held suspicion that Iran must indeed be hiding a covert nuclear weapons program.

But the story is suspect, in part because it is based on evidence that could only be ambiguous, at best. The claim does not reflect U.S. intelligence, and a prominent think tank that has published satellite photography related to past controversies surrounding Iran’s nuclear program has not found any photographs supporting it.

The original Parchin clean-up story by Associated Press correspondent George Jahn, published March 7, reported that two unnamed diplomats from an unidentified country or countries it was not made clear how many were involved told him that satellite photos “appear to show trucks and earth-moving vehicles” at the site.

The two diplomats said they suspected Iran “may be trying to erase evidence” of tests of a “neutron device used to set off a nuclear explosion” because “some of the vehicles at the scene appeared to be hauling trucks and other equipment suited to carting off potentially contaminated soil from the site.”

However, a third diplomat told Jahn he “could not confirm that,” and Jahn was shown no photographs to back up the description offered by his two anonymous sources. Three other diplomats with whom Jahn spoke were apparently unaware of such photographs.

The satellite photographs described to Jahn did not come from U.S. intelligence. Former CIA counterterrorism official Phil Giraldi told IPS that a U.S. intelligence official had confirmed to him that the officials in question were not talking about intelligence provided by U.S. intelligence.

U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland refused to answer specific questions at a March 8 briefing about whether U.S. intelligence had such

satellite photos or whether the U.S. believes that such intelligence exists. She referred to such intelligence only in the conditional tense.

“Any evidence that Iran is seeking to cover its tracks would raise only further concern about the true nature of the program,” she said.

That means that the officials were either from Israel or one of its three European allies the British, French and Germans who have been working closely with Israel to undermine and finally force a revision of the U.S. intelligence community’s 2007 conclusion that Iran has not worked on developing a nuclear weapon since 2003.

Israel provided a series of documents to the IAEA after that intelligence estimate – as recounted by former IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei in his 2011 memoir – aimed at proving that Iran had secretly tested a detonator for an implosion device and had worked on a neutron initiator as recently as 2007. The timing of the story – just after the possibility of an IAEA inspection visit to the site had been suggested by Iran – is also suspect.

The allegation of a clean-up at the site would provide a convenient explanation for the failure of the IAEA to find evidence to support the suggestion in its November 2011 report that Iran constructed a large containment vessel for hydrodynamic tests of nuclear weapons at Parchin.

Reflecting the degree to which the alleged intelligence has been given credence by being amplified without any questioning by the rest of the news media, an AFP report Saturday suggested that, even if Iran now agrees to an IAEA visit to the Parchin site, “it will find itself accused of having cleaned up the site beforehand.”

Further casting doubt on the motive behind the story, the same allegation was made to the same AP reporter more than three and a half months earlier. On Nov. 22, Jahn reported that a single official of an unidentified state had “cited intelligence from his home country, saying it appears that Tehran is trying cover its tracks by sanitizing the site and removing any evidence of nuclear research and development.”

That assertion came in the wake of the IAEA Board of Governors meeting in November, as the IAEA Safeguards Department was planning to request a visit to the site at Parchin, where the agency had just reported nuclear weapons-related testing had been carried out in a large explosive containment chamber, according to unnamed “Member States.”

The claim of satellite intelligence showing Iranian efforts to clean up a site at Parchin has not been supported by the Institute for Science and International

Security (ISIS), the Washington, D.C. think tank that had defended allegations in last November's IAEA report about foreign expertise having assisted in the alleged construction of a containment vessel at Parchin in 2000.

Paul Brannan, a specialist on interpretation of satellite photography for ISIS, told the New York Times that he had looked at many photos of Parchin but so far had not found any photographs of the "specific site" – meaning the site at which the unnamed officials had claimed there were equipment and vehicles indicating possible removal of evidence of past tests.

But Brannan went even further to say he could not find any photographs of sites at Parchin that suggested clean-up. He told the Times the presence of various kinds of equipment in the vicinity is not an indication of removal of evidence by Iran.

"There is no way to know whether or not the activity you see in a particular satellite image is cleansing or just regular work." Brannan added, "There's a lot of activity there always."

The new alarm over alleged satellite images recalls the accusation by the George W. Bush administration in close consultation with Israel in 2004 that Iran was using high explosives to test nuclear weapons at Parchin.

ISIS Executive Director David Albright told interviewer Scott Horton of Antiwar Radio in July 2009 that he had "gotten a tip" in September 2004 that high explosives testing at Parchin "could be used for nuclear weapons." ISIS then published a series of satellite photographs that the organization said were "consistent" with facilities for such nuclear testing.

The satellite images were then cited by Undersecretary of State John Bolton as alarming evidence of covert Iranian nuclear weapons work. The United States and its Western allies put strong pressure on the IAEA to get Iran to agree to a visit to Parchin.

But Bolton and the IAEA had only vague suspicions rather than hard intelligence to go on. The IAEA asked to visit four entirely different areas of the 24-square-mile Parchin facility for places that Israeli intelligence believed were consistent with some kind of nuclear-related testing activity.

The Iranians insisted that the IAEA inspectors could only visit one area per visit, even though they were allowed to visit five different buildings of their own choosing each time. The result was embarrassing visits in January 2005 and again in November that found nothing to justify the suspicions.

Another IAEA mission to Parchin that concedes that the information it had been

given by those unnamed member states was false would deal a serious blow to the efforts of Israel and its European allies to refute the 2007 U.S. intelligence estimate.

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