

# Hyping Iran's Nuke Capabilities

As Iran and the Obama administration maneuver toward a deal on Iran's nuclear program, the Western news media continues to stoke the crisis by hyping Iran's capabilities, including misreporting the significance of a new report on Iran's supply of 20-percent enriched uranium, Gareth Porter writes at Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

News stories on the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report suggested new reasons to fear that Iran is closer to a "breakout" capability than ever before, citing a nearly 50-percent increase in its stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium and the installation of hundreds of additional centrifuges at the Fordow enrichment installation.

But the supposedly dramatic increase in the stockpile of uranium that could theoretically be used to enrich to weapons grade is based on misleading figures in the Nov. 16 IAEA report. The actual increase in the level of that stockpile appears to be 20 percent.

The coverage of the completion of the installation of 2,800 centrifuges at Fordow, meanwhile, continued the media practice of ignoring the linkage between large numbers of idle centrifuges and future negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. The latest round of media coverage of the Iran issue again highlights the failure of major news outlets to reflect the complexity and political subtleties of the Iranian enrichment program.

The IAEA report created understandable confusion about the stockpile of uranium enriched to 20-percent also called 20 percent LEU (low enriched uranium). It does not use the term "stockpile" at all. Instead, it says Iran produced 43 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium during the three months since the August report and cited a total of 135 kg of 20-percent uranium now "in storage," compared with only 91.4 kg in August.

Based on those figures, Reuters suggested that Iran might already be two-thirds of the way to the level of 200-250 kg that "experts say" could be used to build a bomb. The Guardian's Julian Borger wrote that Iran was enriching uranium at a pace that would reach the Israeli "red line" in just seven months.

But analysis of the figures in the last two reports shows that the IAEA total for 20-percent LEU "in storage" actually includes 20-percent LEU that has been sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant in Esfahan for conversion to powder for

fuel plates to be used by Iran's medical reactor but not yet converted.

The November IAEA report includes the information that, as of Sept. 26 six weeks after the data in the August report were collected the total amount of 20-percent LEU fed into conversion process in Esfahan stood at 82.7 kg. That figure is 11.5 kg more than the total of 71.25 kg fed into the conversion process as of the August report. The difference between the two indicates that 11.5 kg had been taken out of the stockpile and sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant at Esfahan during September 2012.

In another indicator of the difference between the IAEA's "in storage" figure and the actual stockpile size, the current IAEA report gives the figure of 73.7 kg of 20-percent LEU from the Fordow facility "withdrawn and verified" by the IAEA over the entire period of such enrichment. That total is 23.7 kg higher than the total of 50 kg from Fordow "withdrawn and verified" given in the August report.

A total of 23.7 kg of 20-percent LEU was evidently taken out of the stockpile available for higher level enrichment and sent for conversion to powder for fuel plates during the last quarter. The current IAEA report nevertheless uses the same overall total of 96.3 kg of 20-percent LEU fed into the conversion process that it used in the August report.

Subtracting the 23.7 kg additional uranium "withdrawn and verified" by the IAEA during the quarter from the total 20-percent enriched uranium production of 43 kg during the quarter reduces the amount added to the stockpile of 20-percent LEU to 19.3 kg. Adding the 19.3 kg to the August total of 91.4 kg gives a total for the stockpile of 110.7 kg a 20-percent increase over the August level rather than the nearly 50-percent increase suggested by news stories.

The IAEA declined to respond to the substance of an IPS e-mail query citing the apparent inconsistencies in the data presented in the last two reports. IAEA Press Officer Greg Webb said in an e-mail that safeguards department officials who had been sent the query "reply that the report is clear and accurate as it stands".

However, the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, D.C., which normally supports everything in IAEA reports, said in a Nov. 16 commentary that the current report "does not make it clear if Iran has sent additional near 20 percent LEU hexafluoride to the Esfahan conversion site after August 2012."

The Washington think tank added, "However, if it did, the near 20 percent LEU remains in the form of hexafluoride." The comment implied that the IAEA may have

included 23.7 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium sent to the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant during the quarter as being "in storage."

The IAEA report also said Iran had halted its conversion of 20-percent LEU for fuel plates during the quarter, although it did not indicate how long the halt might last. Reuters cited that halt as "another potentially worrying development." But in light of the actual level of the stockpile, that halt could simply reflect the fact that Tehran is content to keep the figure from rising too far above 100 kg.

The spokesman for the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, Hossein Naqavi, said Oct. 6 that Iran was taking "a serious and concrete confidence-building measure" by converting some of the 20-percent LEU into powder for fuel plates.

More surprisingly, an Israel official leaked to an Israeli daily that Iran was believed to have consciously avoided allowing its stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium to go much beyond 110 kg by diverting much of it for conversion to fuel for its scientific research reactor.

Citing "defense sources," Ha'aretz military correspondent Amos Harel wrote Oct. 9 that the Israeli policymakers had new information they considered "highly reliable" that each time new production of 20-percent enriched uranium could have brought the total above 130 kg, Iran had "diverted 15 or 20 kg to scientific use." Harel indicated that the new information was the justification for the Israeli position that the threat of Iranian threat of a breakout capability had receded for many months.

Media coverage of the addition of the last of 2,800 centrifuges added to Fordow enrichment facility over the past year played up the idea that the centrifuges could become operational at any time. "They can be started any day," a "senior diplomat" from an unnamed country was quoted by Reuters as saying.

The fact that half of those centrifuges have not been put into operation was treated as a mystery. The Los Angeles Times said, "For unknown reasons, Iran has not begun feeding uranium hexafluoride gas into more than half of the machines." None of the stories mentioned the obvious connection between Iran's continuing to add centrifuges but not putting them into operation and its maneuvering for a deal with the United States.

Iran has been suggesting both publicly and privately throughout 2012 that it is open to an agreement under which it would halt all 20-percent enrichment and agree to other constraints on its enrichment program in return for relief from harsh economic sanctions now levied on the Iranian economy.

Iranian strategists evidently view the unused enrichment capacity at Fordow facility as an incentive for the United States and the P5+1 to seek such an agreement.

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## FBI Snooping on the CIA's Petraeus

The U.S. news media pretends to shy away from sex scandals but actually looks for any excuse to cover them. A case in point has been the ouster of CIA Director David Petraeus, but the press may have missed the bigger story of FBI snooping, says the Independent Institute's Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Nothing titillates the nation's capital like a sex scandal masquerading as a policy controversy. The American news media will use any excuse to get into public officials' private lives so it can try to achieve the ratings of *Entertainment Tonight* style celebrity gossip shows while maintaining a veneer of "responsible journalism."

In America's unique celebrity-driven culture, this phenomenon happens in political campaigns as well as in the current scandal involving David Petraeus, the recently cashiered CIA spy chief.

However, the thin national security implications of this scandal have put the American media out on a limb. In the Petraeus case, the compromise of secrets does not seem to have been an issue, and no laws seem to have been broken (although in the case of Gen. John Allen, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, adultery can be a crime in the tradition-oriented military, even in this day and age).

So the sensationalist American media risks looking as if it's just digging for, well details of top U.S. officials' sexual relationships, the ultimate in gotcha political journalism.

The U.S. media badly needs some political cover to continue getting to the bottom of this scintillating story. Here's an angle that might actually help the country. The real scandal doesn't involve sex, spy agencies, or the U.S. military; it involves the FBI's role and its potential violation of the civil liberties of those officials and people targeted in the investigation.

The FBI seemingly opened an investigation into the cybercrime of threatening emails when Jill Kelley, a friend of David Petraeus, showed emails she received from Paula Broadwell, the alleged paramour of Petraeus, to a friend who was an FBI agent.

The ultimate gumshoe investigation, at great government expense and opportunity cost in investigating real cyber threats in an age of cyberterrorism, apparently uncovered only harassing emails in perhaps a romantic rivalry, a tawdry private extramarital affair that was none of the government's business, and no breach of security. The FBI should have dropped the matter long ago.

One can't help but wonder if the FBI, which has a mutual historical hatred of the CIA, didn't continue the investigation and leak it to take down the CIA's leader and his theretofore golden-boy reputation. Yet David Petraeus is now out of a job and has his career at least damaged; Gen. Allen is now being investigated by the Department of Defense's inspector general for "inappropriate communication" with Kelley after the FBI turned over a treasure trove of tens of thousands of pages of emails through which it snooped. Allen's promotion to supreme allied commander of NATO forces is on hold while the sifting of perhaps steamy emails continues.

Rather than spending taxpayer dollars on further investigation of such merely personal matters, maybe our federal snooping agencies should focus their efforts on real national security investigations.

The American media will probably not focus on this mundane federal abuse of privacy and civil liberties when there are potentially salacious details in the air. After all, some of the actual emails may eventually be aired, sending ratings soaring. Of course, in a free society with commercial media, the media is only catering to what the American people want, unfortunately many times, juicy sex scandals and episodes where celebrities and the mighty have fallen.

But despite trends toward democratization, we still have a republic with representative government, and the people's representatives should be concerned with people's civil liberties and the FBI's possible violation of privacy in this case. The congressional intelligence committees should also be concerned that they weren't notified early on about the FBI investigation of the CIA director. Maybe they could have monitored the investigation and closed it down

earlier.

That's what checks and balances in constitutional government are supposed to do. Congress can still thoroughly investigate the FBI's handling of this unseemly matter. And by the way, while at it, Congress should also abolish the crime of adultery in the military. As in the civilian sector, it may be a moral issue but should not be a crime or even a reason to fire someone, unless it directly affects a supervisor-employee relationship.

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## Corrupting US Democracy

The United States tends to view itself as the gold standard for democracy and bristles at international criticism of its electoral flaws. But recent corrosion of democratic principles, caused mostly by Republicans, has lowered the quality of U.S. democracy, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Before the 2012 election fades in our memories, displaced by sex scandals and other attention-getting news, Americans ought to reflect on what works well and, even more worthy of reflection, what works poorly in their representative democracy.

I'm not talking about post-mortems concerning the specific electoral outcome and what led a particular party or candidate to win or lose. I instead am referring to serious deficiencies that ought to trouble any American, regardless of liking or disliking this month's election result, who values a healthy and fair political system that respects the will of the people.

Some of the most undemocratic aspects of what American electoral democracy has become were in display at least as much in this most recent electoral cycle as in any other. One concerns the role of money, in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision and the ineffectiveness of the Federal Election Commission reaching new depths.

Much commentary since the election has noted how little return some of the biggest campaign bankrollers received on their investment. But any single election result does not negate the outsize role that money has assumed in American elections and how much that role runs contrary to the principle that in a democracy elected representatives are supposed to represent people rather than dollars.

The Supreme Court's reapportionment decisions of the early 1960s established the principle that elected representatives represent people rather than acres or trees. Now dollars have been given back some of the role that was taken away from the acres and the trees.

Then there is the unconscionable inconvenience that many citizens have to endure to exercise their right to vote. Long voter lines even led to a line in Barack Obama's victory speech. In the decentralized American system of administering elections, the problem is largely due to assorted inefficiency, incompetence and misplaced resources at the state and county level.

The added twist, an even more alarming one, with regard to subversion of democratic principles, this year was the concerted effort by adherents of one party to make voting more difficult, in the belief that those who would be dissuaded or prevented from voting would mostly be supporters of the other party.

The net effect of court actions on this subject was to mitigate this problem by striking down some of the voter suppression efforts. But the efforts were still

an outrage; voting is one of the most fundamental rights in a democracy. It also was an outrage that there were not more expressions of outrage, from Republicans, Democrats and independents alike, over the suppression efforts.

Give credit for candor and honesty, however, to the Republican legislative leader in Pennsylvania who spoke openly about how the suppression effort in that state "would allow Governor Romney to win."

Dissuading the other side's supporters from voting is not uncommon in political systems in less developed countries, systems that we usually are apt to disparage. Ultimately the difference between the suppression efforts in the United States and, say, what Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union does to its political opponents is more a matter of degree (especially degree of physical brutality) than of kind.

Another undemocratic contrivance, undemocratic because in a democracy voters are supposed to choose their representatives rather than representatives choosing their voters, is gerrymandering. It has become more of a science than an art in recent years thanks to more sophisticated and extensive polling data and computer software that can take advantage of the data.

Both parties practice it when they have a chance. Democrats in Maryland perpetrated one of the most egregious recent examples. But because Republicans have majority control in more state governments than the Democrats do, the net effect nationally has been to help Republicans.

Republicans retained a solid majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives this year even though Democratic House candidates won more total votes than Republicans. The natural concentration of Democratic strength in urban areas has something to do with this anomaly, but so does the gerrymandering.

Each of the aforementioned flaws has a self-perpetuating quality, and encourages perpetuation in power of whoever happens to be in power now. State legislators who have a majority set the voting rules and draw the legislative districts (for their own seats, not just for Congress) to increase the chance of their own party retaining control.

The role of big money in the post-*Citizens United* era increases the chance of electing presidents who appoint the sort of Supreme Court justices who hand down decisions such as *Citizens United*. And so on.

The self-perpetuation is not as strong and irretrievable as in a non-democratic system such as the one controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. But there are closer parallels with, for example, Iran, which has a freely elected president



and parliament but in which self-perpetuation is facilitated by the role of the supreme leader and by interlocking relationships among bodies such as the Guardian Council and the judiciary.

Some of the most worrisome current threats to the health of American democracy come not from matters involving elections specifically but instead from the attitudes and habits of mind, i.e., the political culture, that are at least as important for the health of any democracy as elections.

We saw one such threat when leaders of the party in control of one of the houses of Congress, when they had not won enough political power in the government overall to get their way on budgetary matters, tried to get their way anyhow by threatening to make the nation default on its debt. In other words, they abandoned democracy for extortion.

Another threat was succinctly expressed in a comment from the minority leader of the U.S. Senate that was as candid and as appalling as the comment from the legislative leader in Pennsylvania. He said that his party's top priority in Congress was for "President Obama to be a one-term president."

The comment was quite honest, as borne out by his party's behavior during the subsequent congressional term. Making the toppling of a political opponent more important than anything else, including legislating in the national interest, is just the sort of dysfunctional political culture that tears democracies apart. There are parallels to this overseas, too. Bangladesh comes to mind as a good comparison.

For a democracy to work well and to stay healthy, the political players in it must have respect for the interests of the nation as a whole that overrides preference for any one electoral outcome or hatred for any one political leader. They also need to respect political outcomes that shape policy and not resort to non-democratic threats of harm to the national interest. What we have seen in recent years are disturbing lapses from both those requirements.

One conclusion is that there may not be as wide a gap as generally supposed between democracy in America and democracies elsewhere that Americans may be quick to disdain. A second conclusion is that bearing the first conclusion in mind adds useful perspective in evaluating and responding to political processes in other countries.

The most important conclusion is that American democracy is more fragile, and its health more precarious, than most Americans like to think. Americans ought to be alert to what threatens their democracy from within and to punish, democratically of course, at the polls, those who would undermine it.

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