

Twisting the Iran-Nuke Intelligence

Since the Reagan administration broke the back of professionalism at the CIA's analytical division, U.S. intelligence has regularly been twisted for geopolitical purposes, including the case made over Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program, as Gareth Porter explains.

By Gareth Porter

For more than three decades, the United States and its European allies have committed one fundamental error after another in the process of creating a commonly held narrative that Iran was secretly pursuing a nuclear weapons program. The story of how suspicions of the Iranian program hardened into convictions is a cautionary tale of political and institutional interests systematically distorting the judgments of both policymakers and intelligence analysts.

Too many of these basic errors have been committed along the way to cover them all in a single article. But four major failures of policymaking and intelligence represent the broad outlines of this systematic problem.

1. Denial of Iranian rights, followed by denial of the truth

The first failure, which set in train all the others, involved the U.S. trying to strangle the nuclear program of the Islamic Republic in its cradle and then blithely acting as though it bore no responsibility for the resulting shift in Iranian nuclear policy. It all started with a decision by the Reagan administration early in the Iran-Iraq war in 1983 to put diplomatic pressure on its allies to stop all nuclear cooperation with Iran. France was pressed to forbid a French-based multilateral consortium from providing the nuclear fuel that Iran had counted on for its lone nuclear reactor at Bushehr.

The U.S. State Department acknowledged at the time that it had no evidence that Iran was working on or even wanted nuclear weapons. That U.S. effort to choke off any nuclear assistance to Iran thus represented an extremely serious violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which guaranteed Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology.

Not surprisingly Iran responded to that U.S. denial of its nuclear rights by defying U.S. wishes and acquiring the technology to enrich uranium for nuclear fuel itself on the black market and later through negotiations with China and Russia. U.S. aggressiveness toward Iran's nuclear program had backfired.

But instead of recognizing that it had made a serious error, Washington

compounded the original policy blunder by treating the Iranian response as prima facie evidence of nuclear weapons intent. In 1995, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, in the course of explaining an order by President Bill Clinton banning all U.S. trade and investment in Iran, accused Iran of having an “organized structure dedicated to acquiring and developing nuclear weapons.”

That was an obvious reference to the Iranian efforts to acquire centrifuge and other enrichment technology. The Clinton administration thus acted as though there was no relationship between Iran’s interest in obtaining gas centrifuge technology and the U.S. denial policy that preceded it.

2. The intelligence goes wrong

The CIA and other Western intelligence agencies began to drift away from reality on the Iran nuclear issue in the early 1990s, when Western intelligence agencies were gleefully poring over intercepted telexes from Sharif University in Tehran seeking various “dual use” technologies – those that could be used either for a nuclear program or for non-nuclear applications. They had found that the telex number on many of the messages was that of the Physics Research Centre, which was known to do research for the Iranian defense ministry. That was enough to convince them that Iran was pursuing a covert nuclear weapons program.

The telexes ultimately turned out to be false positives, however. In late 2007 and early 2008, Iran turned over detailed documentation showing that every one of the “dual use” procurement items sought in those telexes had been requested by various faculties of Sharif University for faculty and student research. And the Physics Research Centre’s telex number was on the telexes because the former head of the organization was teaching at the university and had been asked to help in the procurement of the items. The intelligence analysts had wrongly interpreted the inherently ambiguous “dual use” evidence as confirming pre-existing suspicions of Iran’s intentions.

That analytical failure was a template for a series of four intelligence assessments of the Iranian nuclear program by the CIA’s Nonproliferation Center and later by the U.S. intelligence community as a whole that falsely concluded that Iran had an active nuclear weapons development program as of the time of the assessment. That string of false positives raises serious questions about the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate by a team of analysts that had just repeated the same mistake in a draft estimate only a few months earlier.

3. Ignoring the Fatwa against chemical weapons

The belief of Western governments that Iran must have pursued nuclear weapons has been based on their ignorance of a pivotal historical episode that should

have caused them to question that belief. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, Saddam's troops attacked Iran with chemical weapons many times, killing 20,000 Iranians and severely injuring 100,000. Yet Iran never retaliated with its own chemical weapons, as Joost Hiltermann's *A Poisonous Affair*, the authoritative source on chemical attacks in that war, has documented.

That fact poses a fundamental challenge to the Western narrative on the Iran nuclear issue, because there is no credible explanation for the Iranian failure to retaliate with chemical weapons other than the fact that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had forbidden the possession and use of all weapons of mass destruction as illicit in Islam.

The Revolutionary Guards acted on their own to acquire the capability to produce mustard gas weapons, as the wartime Iranian Minister for military procurement has confirmed in a recent interview. But his account of his meetings with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini also confirms that Khomeini pronounced a *fatwa* against such weapons early in the war and repeated it in 1987.

The implications of that historical episode for an understanding of the politics of WMD policy in Iran are obviously far-reaching. It lends strong credibility to the Iranian claim that the current supreme leader's fatwa against nuclear weapons is an absolute bar to Iran possessing such weapons. But the news media has continued to dismiss the problem by clinging to an old narrative, which was based on false information that Iran not only had possessed chemical weapons but also had used them.

4. Refusing to acknowledge the weaponization evidence is tainted

For nearly a decade, the international politics of the Iran nuclear issue have revolved around intelligence documents and reports of Iran nuclear weapons work. A 1,000-page cache of documents that surfaced in 2004 showed the redesign of Iran's Shahab-3 missile to accommodate a nuclear weapon and high explosives experiments that could only be used for nuclear weapons. More incriminating intelligence documents followed in 2008-09. The IAEA has now been investigating them for nine years.

But Western governments, abetted by compliant news media coverage, have chosen to ignore the considerable evidence that these documents were of very dubious origins. Contrary to the cover story that the documents were passed on to Western intelligence by a participant in a covert Iranian program or by a German spy, a former senior German foreign office official has now revealed that the German intelligence agency, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, obtained them from a sometime source who was a member of the Iranian exile terrorist organization Mujahedeen E-Khalq (MEK). The MEK was then serving Israel's Mossad as a means of

laundering alleged intelligence, so it is safe to assume that the documents came from Israel.

IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei (1997-2009), who insisted that the documents had not been authenticated, recalled in his memoirs, “No-one knew if any of this was real.” Against the wishes of the Bush administration, he refused to use them as evidence against Iran.

Major contradictions between information in the papers and the independently verifiable timelines of Iran’s missile and nuclear programs indicated that the authors were not Iranian specialists. The re-entry vehicle depicted in the studies, for example, was not the one that Iran was redesigning at the time and that was revealed to the world only after the documents were handed over.

El Baradei also revealed that a subsequent series of intelligence documents, which included the claim that Iran had installed a large cylinder at Parchin to test atomic weapons designs, had been passed on to the IAEA directly by Israel. That intelligence proved to be equally problematic: former IAEA nuclear weapons expert Robert Kelley found the Parchin cylinder claim technically implausible.

The U.S. government and its Western allies have all closed their eyes, however, to the evidence that these documents were designed to justify U.S. action by the United States against the Islamic republic. The political convenience of the accepted narrative of the Iran nuclear issue has continued to suppress any active interest in learning the truth.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and historian writing on U.S. national security policy. His latest book is *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This article first appeared in the Middle East Eye.]

A Possible Israeli Turning Point

The upcoming Israeli elections mark a possible turning point in the Mideast with more moderate Israelis challenging Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-line land grab of Palestinian territory. But Netanyahu’s approach is not the deviation from Israel’s history that some claim, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is trepidation in the Zionist ranks over the March 2015 elections for a new Knesset or parliament. It seems that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu got

angry at his more “liberal” coalition partners Tzipi Livni and Yair Lapid because of their opposition to the proposed Israel-equals-a-Jewish-state bill.

In essence, Netanyahu fired them, sacrificing the government’s majority in the Knesset and necessitating the upcoming elections. Some observers believe that the election represents something of a crossroads for the Jewish state.

Roger Cohen, a New York Times columnist wrote a headline piece in the Sunday Review section of the newspaper on Dec. 21, 2014. It was entitled “What Will Israel Become?” and tells us that “uneasiness inhabits Israel.”

Quoting the Israeli writer Amos Oz, Cohen explains further, “there is a growing sense that Israel is becoming an isolated ghetto, which is exactly what the founding fathers and mothers hoped to leave behind them forever when they created the state of Israel.”

Cohen believes that it is Netanyahu’s settlement policy in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that is driving Israeli isolation

Cohen hopes that the upcoming elections will turn out Netanyahu and his allies, all of whom want to expand settlements. What he wants in their place is a coalition of more “moderate” parties which will halt expansion and revive the possibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mr. Cohen isn’t alone. He quotes Ofer Kenig, an Israeli political analyst with the Israel Democracy Institute, as declaring “this [upcoming] election is a critical juncture. We have to choose between being a Zionist and liberal nation or turning into an ethnocentric, nationalist country. I am concerned about the direction in which this delicate democracy is heading.”

Recasting Israeli History

There is something decidedly odd about these concerns. They’re odd because they recast Israel as having originally been something other than “ethnocentric and nationalist.” Or, to put it another way, that most of those founding “fathers and mothers” were something other than the recognizable historical precursors of Benjamin Netanyahu and his expansionist passions.

Liberal Zionists who claim otherwise are essentially ignoring the sort of racist nationalist worldview they are affiliated with. However, Zionist history is too well documented to escape the truth. This is particularly the case in the recorded attitudes that launched the Israeli settlement of the Occupied Territories (OT).

In 1967, just after conquering the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights, it

was not just the rightwing Likudniks who were mad for expansion. It was also the allegedly moderate leftwing Laborites.

Indeed, the great majority of Israeli Jews, regardless of political orientation or level of religiosity, considered the conquest of the OT as a positive historic achievement. Then as now, for the more strident of them, retaining the territories was seen as synonymous with patriotism.

Tom Segev, in his book *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East* (from which the following quotes and data are taken), gives many of the details. In a post-war 1967 poll "nine out of ten [Israelis] replied that the Old City [of Jerusalem] should not be given back; 85 percent said the Golan Heights should not be returned; 73 percent thought that Gaza should not be relinquished; 71 percent said the West Bank should not be given back a smaller majority, 52 percent, said the Sinai Peninsula should not be given back either. Labor Party member Levi Eshkol, who was the prime minister at that time, described the conquests as a "miracle on top of a miracle."

On a post-conquest tour of the Jordan Valley, Eshkol stopped repeatedly to examine the soil, to "feel it, smell it, taste it," so enamored was he of being in possession of the area. A group of prominent Israeli writers of the day, representing both the political right and the left, published "a proclamation for a Greater Israel" and declared that "we are bound to loyalty, to the integrity of our land and no government in Israel has the right to give up this integrity."

As we will see, this is the sentiment that now holds the future of all Israelis hostage.

It was in this national frame of mind that the settlement movement began, launched by what longtime Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Abba Eban described as a reborn Israel – a better place than had existed before the 1967 war. So convinced were the Israelis (and Zionists generally) that a new and greater era had begun that almost no one foresaw the dire consequences of "loyalty" to the land.

And those who did see problems never really considered reversing course because of them. For instance, Theodor Meron, the Israeli foreign ministry's legal counsel in 1967, told the government that settlement of the conquered lands was illegal under international law. He then suggested that settlement go ahead anyway, but disguised as military encampments.

As usual, the Zionists did not care that they were "liberating" someone else's property and that there was bound to be strong objections. When the Palestinian

resistance came, the Israelis reacted with resentment and a rambling list of grievances: decrying that they were hated by the Arabs and by most non-Jews in general and that going back to the 1967 borders would invite a new Holocaust.

When in 2002 the Arab League offered Israel genuine peace with all its commercial benefits in exchange for withdrawing from the Occupied Territories, the Israelis turned them down flat.

Though they did not say so, they simply did not want peace. They wanted the land just as their “founding fathers and mothers” had. Now they have had the land for nearly 50 years and, like a poisoned chalice, it has sickened them. What was considered a “miracle” was really a prelude to disaster and led to a downward spiral into barbarism and growing isolation.

Come the March Elections

But what if Cohen and Kenig get their wish and the March elections remove the Netanyahu government and replace it with one seemingly less dedicated to a maximalist settlement program? Will that lead Israel to reverse course enough to gain peace and worldwide acceptance? Not likely.

A new, more “moderate” government would be restrained by the still prevailing historical sentiment that to give up the West Bank would be an act of treason. They might try to exercise more flexibility in any future negotiations, but there would be a limit to how far they could go.

Therefore, for the Palestinians the result of the upcoming election will determine no more than the size of the Bantustans that will be ultimately offered to them. If Netanyahu wins, they can expect enclaves of minimal size and utility.

From some other government – perhaps led by the Labor Party leader Isaac Herzog – there might be some improvement on this package but, once more, we can be sure that it will fall short of a viable and truly sovereign Palestinian state.

The logic of Zionism has always aimed for a Jewish state in all of “Greater Israel,” and the resulting ideological dedication has been strong enough to prevent any significant change of course. Even the withdrawal from Gaza was a tactical maneuver to contain Palestinian resistance and better secure the West Bank. This dedication is also deadly as is attested to by the strength of the present settler movement: organized, armed to the teeth, and with roots in the military and police. Just how will this group react to any government that even marginally tries to rein them in? There is a good chance they will react with violence. Remember the fate of Yitzhak Rabin. Under such circumstances, it is going to take a lot of leverage, coming from both inside and outside of Israel,

to bring about serious change. It is also clear that the Palestinians alone do not have the capacity to apply this leverage.

Thanks to the United States and its special interest-dominated political system, the Palestinians are thoroughly outgunned by a Zionist state that is willing to ethnically cleanse them at every opportunity. That is why to bring about the necessary change in Israeli behavior, episodes of Palestinian resistance must be accompanied by international efforts to isolate Israel economically and socially. The boycott effort is a long-range one. Nonetheless, it is Palestine's best hope. Regardless of the outcome of the March elections, Israel's habitual violence and its ongoing violation of international laws and the standards of human rights will not change. However, sooner or later the boycott, allied to ongoing episodes of Palestinian resistance, will bring Israel to a real crossroads and then difficult choices will have to be made.

The questionable claim that Israel unites all the Jewish people will not survive these choices. At that point the Israelis, and perhaps the Jewish people worldwide, will divide between those who cling to racially based past hopes and those who see survival as possible only if such hopes are abandoned.

It is an unfortunate fact that the same road that leads to Palestinian liberation may simultaneously lead to dangerous Jewish factionalism. But that is the price the Zionists seem destined to pay for having sold their national soul to a racist ideology.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.
