

IAEA exposes US committee's lies on Iran's nuclear programs

By Peter Symonds
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Four years ago, President George Bush appeared before the UN General Assembly and demanded that the UN rubberstamp a war against Iraq that was based on flagrant lies about Saddam Hussein's so-called weapons of mass destruction. Today, as Bush goes to the UN to demand tough action against Iran, American claims that Tehran has a nuclear weapons program have been exposed as fabrications.

The UN's nuclear supervisory body—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—last week issued a stinging rebuttal of the “erroneous, misleading and unsubstantiated information” contained in a US congressional report entitled “Recognising Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States” released on August 23.

The report from Republican-led House Intelligence Committee (HIC) was nothing but a crude propaganda exercise designed to justify the Bush administration's preparations for punitive action against Iran. Its main purpose was to call on US spy agencies to exert greater efforts to fill the “intelligence gaps”, particularly on Iran's weapons programs—in other words, to manufacture new lies to justify economic sanctions and war.

The lack of substantive evidence against Tehran did not stop the report from categorically asserting that Iran was seeking to produce nuclear weapons, and chemical and biological weapons as well. It is the same modus operandi as 2003 when US Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Pentagon neo-conservatives doctored the so-called evidence about WMDs to provide a pretext for the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq.

Not surprisingly, the IAEA reacted most strongly to the report's attack on the integrity of its own monitoring of Iran's nuclear programs. Its letter took “strong exception” to the “incorrect and misleading statement” that IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei withdrew weapons inspector Christopher Charlier from Iran “for allegedly raising concerns about Iranian deception regarding its nuclear program and concluding that the purpose of Iran's nuclear program is to construct nuclear weapons”.

The IAEA branded as “outrageous and dishonest” the report's suggestion that Charlier might have been removed for “not having adhered to an unstated IAEA policy barring IAEA officials from telling the whole truth about the Iranian nuclear program”. As the letter pointed out, Iran, not ElBaradei, had initiated Charlier's recall and, in doing so, had acted within its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The report's reference to Charlier was not accidental. He became a minor celebrity in extreme right-wing circles in the US—that is, among those pushing most vigorously for war against Iran—when he gave an interview to the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* in July suggesting that Tehran was operating a clandestine weapons program. Like those who seized on his comments, however, Charlier offered no facts to support his claims.

The IAEA letter also took issue with glaring factual errors contained in the report's short section entitled “Evidence for an Iranian nuclear weapons program”. It drew attention to a grossly misleading caption placed under a photograph of Iran's enrichment facility at Natanz, which read: “Iran is currently enriching to weapons grade using a 164-machine centrifuge cascade.”

As the IAEA pointed out, the claim is simply false. The small cascade at the Natanz enrichment plant, which is subject to IAEA inspections, including camera monitoring, has to date only enriched uranium to the level of 3.6 percent—that is, to the level required for Tehran's stated aim of producing nuclear fuel. As the letter caustically pointed out, this hardly qualifies as “weapons grade”, which is generally recognised to be 90 percent enriched or higher.

Even assuming that Tehran was seeking to build a nuclear bomb, an article published in July/August issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimated that 1,500-1,800 centrifuges operating without interruption for a year

would be required to produce enough highly enriched uranium to provide the basis for a crude atomic device. While Iran has plans to expand its Natanz facility, the latest IAEA report revealed that plans were behind schedule and a second 164-machine cascade was not up and running in August.

A spokesman for the congressional committee, Jamal Ware, attempted to brush aside the criticism, declaring that the report only claimed that “Iran is working to develop the capability to enrich uranium to weapons grade, not that they have done so”. The caption was not a mistake, however. If Tehran is not “currently enriching to weapons-grade”, but is years away from having such a capacity, then Iran lacks the basic ingredient for an atomic weapon and the case that it poses an imminent nuclear threat falls apart.

The IAEA letter noted a similar deliberate distortion in the report’s declaration that Iran had “covertly produced” the radioactive isotope polonium-210 (Po-210), highlighting its potential use as a neutron source for a nuclear weapon. The IAEA pointed out that the term “covertly” is misleading as “the production of Po-210 is not required to be reported” under the terms of the NPT agreement signed with Iran. The only evidence for the US claim came from IAEA reports of small-scale experiments, conducted between 1989 and 1993, which were apparently unsuccessful and discontinued.

A rerun of Iraq

The IAEA letter only highlighted the most obvious falsifications about Iran’s nuclear programs, but the remainder of the congressional report is riddled with unsubstantiated allegations or outright lies, largely recycled from US officials or the “American intelligence community”. The *Washington Post*, which first reported the IAEA letter last week, cautiously noted: “Privately, several intelligence officials said the committee report included at least a dozen claims that were either demonstrably wrong or impossible to substantiate.”

The congressional report was largely drawn up by Fredrick Fleitz, a former CIA operative known for his hard-line views on Iran, who worked for John Bolton, currently the US ambassador to the UN, when he was the State Department’s top official on arms proliferation. Then, as now, Bolton was notorious for his aggressive demands for action against the so-called “axis of evil”—Iraq, Iran and North Korea—with Fleitz presumably helping to concoct the “evidence”.

As David Albright, a former nuclear inspector, told the *Washington Post*: “This is like prewar Iraq all over again. You have an Iranian nuclear threat that is spun up, using bad information that’s cherry-picked and a report that trashes the inspectors.” Prior to the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration repeatedly denigrated the failure of UN weapons inspectors in Iraq to uncover any WMDs.

In February 2003, less than a month before the US launched its assault, the chief weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohammed ElBaradei presented reports to the UN Security Council declaring that no evidence had been found of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons in Iraq—effectively puncturing the case for war made by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

IAEA director ElBaradei was particularly categorical, declaring: “We have to date found no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities in Iraq.” “He also played a key role in exposing the fraudulent claims, first made by the British government, that Iraq had attempted to purchase significant quantities of uranium from Niger. ElBaradei told the UN in March 2003 that the documents offered as proof were crude forgeries, yet Bush’s officials continued to maintain that Iraq was trying to acquire nuclear weapons.

Following the occupation, US teams scoured Iraq for months, but found neither weapons of mass destruction nor any evidence of WMD programs. To deflect attention from its own responsibility for the lies, the Bush administration blamed the CIA and other spy agencies for an “intelligence failure”. At the same time, Washington continued its underground campaign against ElBaradei, culminating in a failed attempt last year to replace him with an IAEA director more amenable to US interests.

As in the case of Iraq, the Bush administration’s accusations against Iran have nothing to do with any “strategic threat” to the US. Even if it managed to acquire a few crude atomic bombs, Tehran would be no match for the US

military and its massive nuclear arsenal. The allegation that Iran is building nuclear weapons is simply the pretext for manufacturing a climate of fear and war hysteria at home, while pressing ahead with an agenda of “regime change” in Iran. Despite the deepening military disasters confronting the US-led occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration is determined to press ahead with its ambitions to assert American domination over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

There is growing frustration in Washington with the UN’s failure to impose sanctions on Iran. The White House bullied the European powers, Russia and China into setting an August 31 deadline for Tehran to freeze all uranium enrichment programs. Iran, however, insisted on its rights under the NPT to carry out all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment, and denounced the UN resolution as illegal. The US push for punitive measures is meeting continued resistance from its European and Asian rivals, all of which have substantial economic interests in Iran.

Speaking last Friday about his UN speech today, President Bush declared: “My concern is that they’ll [Iran] stall, they’ll try to wait us out. So part of my objective in New York is to remind people that stalling should not be allowed—we need to move the process.”

Bush’s impatience is not driven by any objective assessment of Iran’s nuclear programs, but his administration’s pressing political agenda. Confronting an uphill battle in mid-term congressional polls in November, and the end of the second presidential term just over two years away, the White House senses that it is running out of time. Far from pulling back, the Bush administration is lurching towards another reckless military adventure against Iran.

One sure sign that the Bush administration is intensifying its campaign for “regime change” in Tehran is the establishment of units in the US State Department and Pentagon dedicated to undermining the Iranian government. In February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requested an additional \$75 million to support Iranian exile groups and political opposition inside Iran. A new Iranian Affairs office has been established under the supervision of Vice President Cheney’s daughter, Elizabeth Cheney.

What is less well known is that the Pentagon has established the Iranian equivalent of the notorious Office of Special Plans (OSP), which was responsible for concocting the lies about Iraq’s WMDs, based on the claims of exiles such as convicted embezzler Ahmed Chalabi. The *Los Angeles Times* revealed the existence of the new office, known as the Directorate for Iran, in May. According to the newspaper, the Iranian Directorate has six personnel, is based in the same area as the OSP and includes OSP veterans among its staff and larger body of advisers, including its former head Abram Shulsky.