

MEK STIRS POT IN IRAN DESPITE IMPROVED NEGOTIATION OUTLOOK AFTER ROHANI'S ELECTION

In a remarkably welcome surprise, moderate cleric Hassan Rohani won last month's presidential election in Iran and did so with a large enough margin to avoid a runoff. In the immediate aftermath of the election, there was hope that the heated rhetoric on both sides of the dispute over Iran's nuclear technology would calm a bit:

Though thousands of jubilant Iranians poured onto the streets in celebration of the victory, the outcome will not soon transform Iran's tense relations with the West, resolve the row over its nuclear program or lessen its support of Syria's president in the civil war there – matters of national security that remain the domain of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

But the president runs the economy and wields broad influence in decision-making in other spheres. Rohani's resounding mandate could provide latitude for a diplomatic thaw with the West and more social freedoms at home after eight years of belligerence and repression under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was legally barred from seeking a third consecutive term.

"This victory is a victory of wisdom, a victory of moderation, a victory of growth and awareness and a victory of commitment over extremism and ill-temper," Rohani told state television, promising to work for all Iranians,

including the hardline so-called “Principlists” whom he defeated at the poll.

Alas, those who favor violence over negotiation don’t intend to sit idly while moderation has a chance of breaking out. Today, we have a new “revelation” brought to us in a Reuters article:

An exiled opposition group said on Thursday it had obtained information about a secret underground nuclear site under construction in Iran, without specifying what kind of atomic activity it believed would be carried out there.

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The NCRI said the site was inside a complex of tunnels beneath mountains 10 km (6 miles) east of the town of Damavand, itself about 50 km northeast of Tehran. Construction of the first phase began in 2006 and was recently completed, it said.

The group released satellite photographs of what it said was the site. But the images did not appear to constitute hard evidence to support the assertion that it was a planned nuclear facility.

The Reuters article identifies NCRI as the National Council of Resistance of Iran and in addition to identifying them as “exiled dissidents” also mentions affiliation with the “People’s Mujahideen Organisation of Iran (PMOI)” without noting that the more commonly used acronym for the latter group is MEK. That would be the same MEK that was only de-listed by the US Department of State as a terrorist organization last year. Promptly after de-listing, the group moved to register as lobbyists:

An Iranian group that was listed as a terrorist organization until last year

has formally registered to lobby the Obama administration.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran told the Justice Department that it plans to “educate” the public and the U.S. government about the need to pursue an Iran policy “based on respect for human rights, non-proliferation, and promotion of democracy.” The council is an umbrella group of five Iranian opposition groups, the largest of which is the delisted terror group Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MEK.

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The State Department closed the council’s Washington office in 2002, calling it a front group for the MEK. Since then, the group has earned the good graces of U.S. conservatives by drawing international attention to Iran’s clandestine uranium enrichment facility in Natanz.

That bit about NCRI exposing the Natanz facility? Even though it also is cited in today’s Reuters article, there is good reason to believe that MEK came into the information through a leak to them rather than their own intelligence-gathering:

As I understand the sequence of events, the United States—knowing full well that Iran had a clandestine centrifuge program—watched Iran dig two MASSIVE HOLES near Natanz (see the big picture), then ratted the Iranians out to the IAEA. About the same time, someone leaked that information to an Iranian dissident group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which then released the second-hand dope in a press conference where they got the details wrong.

Lewis goes on to cite convincing evidence in that article at Arms Control Wonk. That sequence of events, though, in which US intelligence made the discovery, briefed IAEA and then someone leaked the intelligence to the MEK is a sequence for which we have seen multiple variants over the years since.

I have posted many times on the network of “diplomats” in Vienna who leak either to George Jahn of AP or Fredrik Dahl of Reuters (Dahl wrote today’s Reuters article). Most of those leaks over the past few years have been couched in a way to put Iran in the worst possible light. Late in May, Jahn appears to have had an epiphany and finally pointed out that he likely was being fed slanted information.

Time will soon tell us whether there is indeed a new secret Iranian nuclear facility or if, as happens when NCRI produces its own “intelligence”, this is just another load of bunk. If NCRI’s satellite photos only appear on David Albright’s site (he has not yet posted them), then this is likely just another disinformation campaign by MEK. Real intelligence of a new site would very likely leak to a much wider array than just the credulous transcription crowd, especially given the tendency of John Brennan and Barack Obama to leak anything that puts them in a more flattering light or stronger bargaining position. My gut leans more toward this being more chaff thrown up by MEK because Iran has known that they have been under the most intense scrutiny ever under the Obama administration and that construction of a secret facility would inevitably be detected by US intelligence, just as Natanz was.

Postscript: Yes, I have used NCRI and MEK interchangeably in the text, as I find them to be functionally indistinguishable.