

PREDICTIONS OF ISRAELI ATTACK ON IRAN HIT TRADITIONAL MEDIA-HOW WE GOT THERE

In late November of 2007, the world—and especially the progressive blogosphere—was shocked when the George W. Bush administration released a National Intelligence Estimate that came to the firm conclusion that Iran had suspended work on its nuclear weapon program back in 2003. This was the same Bush intelligence community that had produced the fraudulent NIE in 2002 that came to the false conclusion that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and intended to restart development of nuclear weapons. The progressive blogosphere had made a regular habit of predicting new dates for when Israel, or even the US, would attack Iran under the guise of stopping its development of nuclear weapons. The rate of new predictions for attacks slowed considerably in the face of the 2007 NIE.

In September of 2009, speculation on plans to attack Iran got a new impetus, as the US announced the discovery of a previously secret uranium enrichment facility being built by Iran deep inside a mountain near Qum. Rhetoric from the US heated up considerably in response to this discovery:

Mr. Obama's aides and a raft of intelligence officials argued that the small, hidden plant was unsuitable for producing reactor fuel that might be used in a peaceful nuclear program. Moreover, its location, deep inside an Iranian Revolutionary Guards base about 20 miles from the religious center of Qum, strongly suggested it was designed for covert use in weapons, they said.

Late Friday afternoon, preparing to return to Washington, Mr. Obama issued a stark warning about the nuclear negotiations that are to begin next week, the first direct talks between the two countries in 30 years.

“Iran is on notice that when we meet with them on Oct. 1 they are going to have to come clean and they will have to make a choice,” he said. The alternative to giving up their program, he warned, is to “continue down a path that is going to lead to confrontation.”

Shortly after the discovery of the Qum facility was announced, the Stuxnet worm was released.

Iran confirmed in November, 2010 that uranium centrifuges had been damaged by the worm. Follow-up in January of this year indicated that the worm may have destroyed up to 1000 of Iran’s centrifuges at its large Natanz facility and that effects began as early as February, 2010, only five months after the announcement of the Qum discovery:

Everything appeared to be going well for the Iranian program up through Nov. 16, 2009, the date of a quarterly report by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. At that point, there had been a “steady increase in the number of centrifuges” at Iran’s Natanz plant, reaching a peak of 8,692 installed centrifuges.

But by Feb. 18, 2010, the quarterly reports issued by IAEA inspectors began registering problems there, according to a little-noticed analysis by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), released Dec. 23. By then, Iran had pulled the plug on about 1,000 centrifuges it had previously installed, ISIS concluded.

With very little fanfare, the US developed a new NIE on Iran that was completed in February of this year. It remains classified, but here is how Josh Rogin reported on how the new NIE likely walked back the key 2007 findings:

The U.S. intelligence community has completed and is circulating a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear weapons program that walks back the conclusion of the 2007 NIE, which stated that Iran had halted work on its covert nuclear weapons program.

Significantly, Rogin obtained sabre-rattling quotes from both a Republican and a Democrat regarding the assessment:

House Foreign Affairs ranking Democrat Howard Berman (D-CA) told *The Cable* he had heard the new NIE would walk back the controversial conclusions of the 2007 version, but that he hadn't read it yet. Regardless, he said, the 2007 Iran NIE was now obsolete and discredited.

"Nobody had been paying attention to the older NIE. A few people on the outside focused on it because they didn't want us to go down the sanctions route but neither the administration nor the Congress paid it much attention," Berman said. "I thought the NIE estimate then was a faulty one because it focused on some aspects of weaponization – even as Iran was continuing to enrich."

/snip/

Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL), a former intelligence officer for the U.S. Navy, told *The Cable*, "The 2007 NIE was a mistake," and this document appears to be more realistic. He urged the intelligence community to take a less technical and more comprehensive look at

the Iranian leadership's actions when making such judgments.

"My hope is that the current leaders of the intelligence community look not just at technical details and also comment regularly on Iran's leaders," Kirk said. "In Intelligence 101 we are taught to measure both capability and intent politically, and the intent here on the part of the Iranian regime is pretty clear."

Last month, the Scary Iran Plot emerged, with the US accusing Iran of plotting to kill the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US.

With all that as background, the sport of predicting an attack on Iran has now moved from the progressive blogosphere to the traditional press. Last night, Mad Dog found an alarming number of articles from the mainstream press, all predicting an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. See comments 10 through 16 of this post for the links and Mad Dog's excerpts.

Obama even joined the fray this morning, making a comment on Iran's nuclear program while at the G20 Summit in France:

"We had the opportunity to talk about a range of security issues," Obama told reporters following talks with Sarkozy ahead of a G20 heads of state summit in the French resort of Cannes.

"One in particular that I want to mention is the continuing threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. The IAEA is scheduled to release a report on Iran's nuclear program next week and President Sarkozy and I agree on the need to maintain the unprecedented pressure on Iran to meet its obligations."

Oh. There's just one small technical detail

(yes, Mr. Kirk, technical information DOES matter!) that should be taken into consideration in all this talk of Iran developing a nuclear weapon. In this article from August, where Reuters reported that Iran had begun moving centrifuges into the Qum facility, we got this rare reminder of where the Iranian enrichment program stands with regard to the level of enrichment that is needed for a weapon:

The Islamic Republic also said in June that it aimed to triple its capacity to enrich uranium to a higher grade – 20 percent fissile purity – which it says will be used to replenish the fuel stock for a medical research reactor.

Western officials and analysts say that by producing 20 percent enriched material Iran has taken a significant step closer to the 90 percent threshold suitable for atom bombs.

It would appear that Iran having a stated target of tripling its output of 20% enriched uranium is close enough to 90% that we need to give Israel the all-clear for attacking Iran now.

That sort of conclusion leads one to wonder whether the Obama administration's 2011 NIE will go down in history alongside the Bush administration's 2002 NIE as blatantly manipulated to provide a basis for war. While Mark Kirk is busily telling us to look strongly at Iran's intentions regarding a nuclear weapon, the best available technical information indicates they are still not on the cusp of developing one.