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Why Iran Distrusts the US in Nuke Talks

By Ray McGovern

April 1, 2015

The Iranians may be a bit paranoid but, as the saying goes, this does not mean some folks are not out to get them. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his knee-jerk followers in Washington clearly *are* out to get them – and they know it.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the surreal set of negotiations in Switzerland premised not on evidence, but rather on an assumption of Iran’s putative “ambition” to become a nuclear weapons state – like Israel, which maintains a secret and sophisticated nuclear weapons arsenal estimated at about 200 weapons. The supposed threat is that Iran might build one.

Israel and the U.S. know from their intelligence services that Iran has no active nuclear weapons program, but they are not about to let truth get in the way of their concerted effort to marginalize Iran. And so they fantasize before the world about an Iranian nuclear weapons program that must be stopped at all costs – including war.

Among the most surprising aspects of this is the fact that most U.S. allies are so willing to go along with the charade and Washington’s catch-all solution – sanctions – as some U.S. and Israeli hardliners open call for a sustained bombing campaign of Iranian nuclear sites that could inflict a massive loss of human life and result in an environmental catastrophe.

On March 26, arch-neocon John Bolton, George W. Bush's Ambassador to the United Nations, graced the pages of the New York Times with his most recent appeal ^[1] for an attack on Iran. Bolton went a bit too far, though, in citing the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of November 2007, agreed to unanimously by all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies. Perhaps he reasoned that, since the "mainstream media" rarely mentions that NIE, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," he could get away with distorting its key findings, which were:

"We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. ... We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons. ...

"Our assessment that Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressure indicates Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic and military costs."

An equally important fact ignored by the mainstream media is that the key judgments of that NIE have been revalidated by the intelligence community every year since. But reality is hardly a problem for Bolton. As the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, Bolton made quite a name for himself by insisting that it was the proper function of a policy maker like him – not intelligence analysts – to interpret the evidence from intelligence.

An 'Embarrassment'

So those of us familiar with Bolton's checkered credibility were not shocked by his New York Times op-ed, entitled "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran." Still less were we shocked to see him dismiss "the rosy 2007 National Intelligence Estimate" as an "embarrassment."

Actually, an embarrassment it was, but not in the way Bolton suggests. Highly embarrassing, rather, was the fact that Bolton was among those inclined to push President Bush hard to bomb Iran. Then, quite suddenly, an honest NIE appeared, exposing the reality that Iran's nuclear weapons program had been stopped in 2003, giving the lie not only to neocon propaganda, but also to Bush's assertion that Tehran's leaders had admitted they were developing nuclear weapons (when they had actually asserted the opposite).

Bush lets it all hang out in his memoir, *Decision Points*. Most revealingly, he complains bitterly that the NIE "tied my hands on the military side" and called its findings "eye-popping."

A disgruntled Bush writes, "The backlash was immediate. [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad hailed the NIE as a 'great victory.'" Bush's apparent "logic" here is to use the widespread disdain for Ahmadinejad to discredit the NIE through association, i.e. whatever Ahmadinejad praises must be false.

But can you blame Bush for his chagrin? Alas, the NIE had knocked out the props from under the anti-Iran propaganda machine, imported duty-free from Israel and tuned up by neoconservatives here at home.

In his memoir, Bush laments: “I don’t know why the NIE was written the way it was. ... Whatever the explanation, the NIE had a big impact — and not a good one.”

Spelling out how the Estimate had tied his hands “on the military side,” Bush included this (apparently unedited) kicker: “But after the NIE, how could I possibly explain using the military to destroy the nuclear facilities of a country the intelligence community said had no active nuclear weapons program?”

It seems worth repeating that the key judgments of the 2007 NIE have been reaffirmed every year since. As for the supposedly urgent need to impose sanctions to prevent Iran from doing what we are fairly certain it is not doing – well, perhaps we could take some lessons from the White Queen, who bragged that in her youth she could believe “six impossible things before breakfast” and counseled Alice to practice the same skill.

Sanctions, Anyway, to the Rescue

Despite the conclusions of the U.S. intelligence community, the United States and other countries have imposed unprecedented sanctions ostensibly to censure Iran for “illicit” nuclear activities while demanding the Iran prove the negative in addressing allegations, including “intelligence” provided via Israel and its surrogates, that prompt international community concerns about Iran’s nuclear program.

And there’s the rub. Most informed observers share historian/journalist Gareth Porter’s conclusion ^[2] that the main sticking point at this week’s negotiations in Lausanne is the issue of how and when sanctions on Iran will be lifted. And, specifically, whether they will be lifted as soon as Iran has taken “irreversible” actions to implement core parts of the agreement.

In Lausanne, the six-nation group (permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) reportedly want the legal system behind the sanctions left in place, even after the sanctions have been suspended, until the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officially concludes that Iran’s nuclear activities are exclusively peaceful – a process that could take many years.

Iran’s experience with an IAEA highly influenced by the U.S. and Israel has been, well, not the best – particularly since December 2009 under the tenure of Director-General Yukiya Amano, a Japanese diplomat whom State Department cables reveal to be in Washington’s pocket.

Classified cables released by Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning and WikiLeaks show that Amano credited his success in becoming director-general largely to U.S. government support – and promptly stuck his hand out for U.S. money.

Further, Amano left little doubt that he would side with the United States in the confrontation with Iran and that he would even meet secretly with Israeli officials regarding their purported evidence on Iran's hypothetical nuclear weapons program, while staying mum about Israel's actual nuclear weapons arsenal.

According to U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA's headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering the prospect that Amano would advance U.S. interests in ways that outgoing IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei never did.

In a July 9, 2009, cable ^[3], American chargé Geoffrey Pyatt – yes, the same diplomat who helped Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland choose “Yats” (Arseniy Yatsenyuk) to be the post-coup prime minister of Ukraine – said Amano was thankful for U.S. support for his election,” noting that “U.S. intervention with Argentina was particularly decisive.”

A grateful Amano told Pyatt that as IAEA director-general, he would take a different “approach on Iran from that of ElBaradei” and that he “saw his primary role as implementing” U.S.-driven sanctions and demands against Iran.

Pyatt also reported that Amano had consulted with Israeli Ambassador Israel Michaeli “immediately after his appointment” and that Michaeli “was fully confident of the priority Amano accords verification issues.” Pyatt added that Amano privately agreed to “consultations” with the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission.

In other words, Amano has shown himself eager to bend in directions favored by the United States and Israel, especially regarding Iran's nuclear program. His behavior contrasts with that of the more independent-minded ElBaradei, who resisted some of Bush's key claims about Iraq's supposed nuclear weapons program, and even openly denounced forged documents about “yellowcake uranium” as “not authentic.” [For more on Amano, see Consortiumnews.com's “America's Debt to Bradley Manning ^[4].”]

It is a given that Iran misses ElBaradei; and it is equally clear that it knows precisely what to expect from Amano. If you were representing Iran at the negotiating table, would you want the IAEA to be the final word on whether or not the entire legal system authorizing sanctions should be left in place?

Torpedoing Better Deals in 2009 and 2010

Little has been written to help put some context around the current negotiation in Lausanne and show how very promising efforts in 2009 and 2010 were sabotaged – the first by Jundullah, a terrorist group in Iran, and the second by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. If you wish to understand why Iran lacks the trust one might wish for in negotiations with the West, a short review may be helpful.

During President Barack Obama's first year in office, the first meeting of senior level American and Iranian negotiators, then-Under Secretary of State William Burns and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, on Oct. 1, 2009, seemed to yield surprisingly favorable results.

Many Washington insiders were shocked when Jalili gave Tehran's agreement in principle to send abroad 2,640 pounds (then as much as 75 percent of Iran's total) of low-enriched uranium to be turned into fuel for a small reactor that does medical research.

Jalili approved the agreement "in principle," at a meeting in Geneva of representatives of members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany. Even the New York Times acknowledged that this, "if it happens, would represent a major accomplishment for the West, reducing Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon quickly, and buying more time for negotiations to bear fruit."

The conventional wisdom in Western media is that Tehran backed away from the deal. That is true, but less than half the story – a tale that highlights how, in Israel's (and the neocons') set of priorities, regime change in Iran comes first. The uranium transfer had the initial support of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And a follow-up meeting was scheduled for Oct. 19, 2009, at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

The accord soon came under criticism, however, from Iran's opposition groups, including the "Green Movement" led by defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has had ties to the American neocons and to Israel ^[5] since the Iran-Contra days of the 1980s when he was the prime minister who collaborated on secret arms deals.

At first blush, it seemed odd that it was Mousavi's U.S.-favored political opposition that led the assault on the nuclear agreement, calling it an affront to Iran's sovereignty and suggesting that Ahmadinejad wasn't being tough enough.

Then, on Oct. 18, a terrorist group called Jundullah, acting on amazingly accurate intelligence, detonated a car bomb at a meeting of top Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders and tribal leaders in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan in southeastern Iran. A car full of Guards was also attacked.

A brigadier general who was deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards ground forces, the Revolutionary Guards brigadier commanding the border area of Sistan-Baluchistan, and three other brigade commanders were killed in the attack; dozens of other military officers and civilians were left dead or wounded.

Jundullah took credit for the bombings, which followed years of lethal attacks on Revolutionary Guards and Iranian policemen, including an attempted ambush of President Ahmadinejad's motorcade in 2005.

Tehran claims Jundullah is supported by the U.S., Great Britain and Israel, and former CIA Middle East operations officer Robert Baer has fingered Jundullah as one of the "good terrorist" groups benefiting from American help.

I believe it no coincidence that the Oct. 18 attack – the bloodiest in Iran since the 1980-88 war with Iraq – came one day before nuclear talks were to resume at the IAEA in Vienna to follow up on the Oct. 1 breakthrough. The killings were sure to raise Iran's suspicions about U.S. sincerity.

It's a safe bet that after the Jundullah attack, the Revolutionary Guards went directly to their patron, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, arguing that the bombing and roadside attack proved that the West couldn't be trusted. Khamenei issued a statement on Oct. 19 condemning the terrorists, whom he charged "are supported by certain arrogant powers' spy agencies."

The commander of the Guards' ground forces, who lost his deputy in the attack, charged that the terrorists were "trained by America and Britain in some of the neighboring countries," and the commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards threatened retaliation.

The attack was front-page news in Iran, but not in the United States, where the mainstream media quickly consigned the incident to the memory hole. The American media also began treating Iran's resulting anger over what it considered an act of terrorism and its heightened sensitivity to outsiders crossing its borders as efforts to intimidate "pro-democracy" groups supported by the West.

Despite the Jundullah attack and the criticism from the opposition groups, a lower-level Iranian technical delegation did go to Vienna for the meeting on Oct. 19, but Jalili stayed away. The Iranians questioned the trustworthiness of the Western powers and raised objections to some details, such as where the transfer should occur. The Iranians broached alternative proposals that seemed worth exploring, such as making the transfer of the uranium on Iranian territory or some other neutral location.

But the Obama administration, under mounting domestic pressure to be tougher with Iran, dismissed Iran's counter-proposals out of hand, reportedly at the instigation of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and neocon regional emissary Dennis Ross.

If at First You Don't Succeed

Watching all this, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan saw parallels between Washington's eagerness for an escalating confrontation with Iran and the way the United States had marched the world, step by step, into the invasion of Iraq.

In spring 2010, hoping to head off another such catastrophe, the two leaders dusted off the Oct. 1 uranium transfer initiative and got Tehran to agree to similar terms on May 17, 2010. Both called for sending 2,640 pounds of Iran's low-enriched uranium abroad in exchange for nuclear rods that would have no applicability for a weapon. In May 2010, that meant roughly 50 percent of Iran's low-enriched uranium would be sent to Turkey in exchange for higher-enriched uranium for medical use.

Yet, rather than embrace this Iranian concession as at least one significant step in the right direction, U.S. officials sought to scuttle it by pressing instead for more sanctions. The U.S. media did its part by insisting that the deal was just another Iranian trick that would leave Iran with enough uranium to theoretically create one nuclear bomb.

An editorial in the Washington Post on May 18, 2010, entitled “Bad Bargain ^[6],” concluded wistfully/wishfully: “It’s possible that Tehran will retreat even from the terms it offered Brazil and Turkey — in which case those countries should be obliged to support U.N. sanctions.”

On May 19, a New York Times’ editorial ^[7] rhetorically patted the leaders of Brazil and Turkey on the head as if they were rubes lost in the big-city world of hardheaded diplomacy. The Times wrote: “Brazil and Turkey ... are eager to play larger international roles. And they are eager to avoid a conflict with Iran. We respect those desires. But like pretty much everyone else, they got played by Tehran.”

The disdain for this latest Iranian concession was shared by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was busy polishing her reputation for “toughness” by doing all she could to undermine the Brazil-Turkey initiative. She pressed instead for harsh sanctions.

“We have reached agreement on a strong draft [sanctions resolution] with the cooperation of both Russia and China,” Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 18, making clear that she viewed the timing of the sanctions as a riposte to the Iran-Brazil-Turkey agreement.

“This announcement is as convincing an answer to the efforts undertaken in Tehran over the last few days as any we could provide,” she declared. Her spokesman, Philip J. Crowley, was left with the challenging task of explaining the obvious implication that Washington was using the new sanctions to scuttle the plan for transferring half of Iran’s enriched uranium out of the country.

Obama Overruled?

Secretary Clinton got her UN resolution and put the kibosh on the arrangement that Brazil and Turkey had worked out with Iran. The Obama administration celebrated its victory in getting the UN Security Council on June 9, 2010, to approve a fourth round of economic sanctions against Iran. Obama also signed on to even more draconian penalties sailing through Congress.

It turned out, though, that Obama had earlier encouraged both Brazil and Turkey to work out a deal to get Iran to transfer about half its low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for more highly enriched uranium that could only be used for peaceful medical purposes. But wait. Isn’t that precisely what the Brazilians and Turks succeeded in doing?

Da Silva and Erdogan, understandably, were nonplussed, and da Silva actually released a copy of an earlier letter of encouragement from Obama.

No matter. The tripartite agreement was denounced by Secretary Clinton and ridiculed by the U.S. mainstream media. And that was kibosh enough. Even after Brazil released Obama’s supportive letter, the President would not publicly defend the position he had taken earlier.

So, once again. Assume you’re in the position of an Iranian negotiator. Trust, but verify, was Ronald Reagan’s approach. We are likely to find out soon whether there exists the level of trust

necessary to start dealing successfully with the issue of most concern to Iran – lifting the sanctions.