

Bush administration uses IAEA report to make new demands and threats to Iran

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The latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran's nuclear programs, handed to member states on Monday, has already prompted a new round of criticisms, demands and threats on the part of the US and its allies. The report will be released publicly only after it has been discussed at next week's meeting of the IAEA board of governors.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared the report to be "very troubling", claiming it demonstrated Iran was "willfully withholding" information about "potential weaponisation". Implying Iran was actively involved in weapons research, he added: "There are a number of different questions out there about the military's involvement in this nuclear program, about Iran's efforts to fabricate hemispheres of uranium. And I'm not sure other than for a weapon why you would do that."

Even before receiving the report, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary David Milliband last week mooted a new round of UN sanctions on Iran over its failure to shut down its Natanz uranium enrichment plant and end construction of a heavy-water research reactor at Arak. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned on Tuesday of increased international pressure, including through the UN Security Council, if Iran failed to provide "reasonable answers to our questions".

Yesterday Rice declared that Iran "had a lot of explaining to do about the IAEA report, which essentially sees them as not cooperating on some very important dark questions that the international community has about their programs." An article in the *Jerusalem Post* article reported that Israel, which has repeatedly hinted at a military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, was "pleased" with the IAEA. An Israeli foreign ministry spokesperson declared that the report "reaffirms that Iran continues to flout UN Security Council resolutions".

The mounting pressure on Iran is being fuelled by selective media leaks from the report, highlighting Iran's supposed failure to provide adequate explanations to the IAEA on aspects of its past activities. The BBC headlined its story: "Iran withholds nuclear details"; the Associated Press said: "Iran may be withholding info in nuke probe"; and Agence France Press: "IAEA report turns heat up on Iran".

The *New York Times* claimed the report was "unusually blunt and detailed", pointing to documents supplied by Western intelligence agencies indicating that Tehran had ventured into explosives, uranium processing and missile warhead design. The article cited Iran's installation of more sophisticated gas centrifuges at its Natanz plant and the military's involvement in their manufacture.

Once again an attempt is being made to ramp up a climate of fear on the basis of

misleading or false statements. None of the allegations about “potential weaponisation” related to Iran’s current activities. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, the IAEA report provided no evidence that any weapons program continued after 2004. Last December, a National Intelligence Estimate drawn up jointly by 16 US intelligence agencies found that Iran had abandoned research into nuclear weapons in 2003.

Moreover, the claims that Iran had previously tested high explosives, had plans to modify its Shabab missile to carry a nuclear device and possessed a document on the fabrication of uranium hemispheres are not new. All these allegations relate to documents allegedly found on a laptop purportedly smuggled out of Iran in 2004. Up until February, the US administration provided details to the IAEA but refused to formally release the intelligence, thus preventing the body from discussing the claims with Iranian authorities.

The US finally released the data in an attempt to undermine efforts by IAEA director general Mohammed ElBaradei to clarify all outstanding issues related to Iran’s nuclear activities. The decision was also part of the Bush administration’s campaign to discredit the NIE findings and to create the conditions for pushing through another UN Security Council resolution in early March strengthening sanctions against Iran.

Iran has declared the documents to be forgeries and insisted that all its nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes. It has rejected UN Security Council resolutions as illegal, pointing to its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to pursue all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment and the building of research reactors. Iran’s IAEA ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh declared that the latest report showed that “Iran’s entire nuclear activities are peaceful”.

The full story on the mysterious laptop is yet to emerge. In his 2006 book *Target Iran*, former American weapons inspector Scott Ritter pointed to possible Israeli involvement in concocting the documents. “The link between the laptop data and Israel’s earlier intelligence could be viewed as a coincidence, but some European intelligence officials believe there is a link, and that link is Israel, and as such the whole package of intelligence that is included in the laptop is questionable in terms of its overall veracity,” he wrote.

“The Iranians, for their part, called the laptop intelligence ‘total fabrication’. However, in private meetings with the IAEA, the Iranians did indicate that there were aspects of reality woven throughout the entire laptop story. Some point to these Iranian admissions as proof that the laptop story is credible; others say it only reinforces their concern that the Israelis built an overall story about military involvement in a nuclear weapons program using as seed-stock a few verifiable facts” (*Target Iran*, Scott Ritter, p.184).

Threat of US military strike

Even if all of the documents were authentic, they would offer no conclusive proof that Iran had a nuclear weapons program in the past, let alone that it has continued to the present day. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, the IAEA asked Tehran to respond to 11 issues to clarify the nature of its nuclear programs. The reply sent on May 23 was not included in the latest report.

If all the documents proved to be forgeries, it would not halt the Bush administration’s campaign to vilify the Iranian regime. Other “evidence” would be found or concocted to justify Washington’s demands, in open contravention of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty, that Iran shut down all enrichment activity. Or other pretexts would be brought to the fore: allegations of Iranian “meddling” in Iraq or support for so-called terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian party Hamas.

On Sunday, former US President Jimmy Carter mentioned the unmentionable by putting a figure on the size of Israel’s nuclear arsenal. In response to a question, he dismissed a nuclear-armed Iran as a threat, declaring that Iran would face overwhelming odds against the huge number of nuclear weapons held by the US, Britain, France and Israel, which he said had “150 or more”. His comments underscore the hypocrisy of the Bush administration, which has no objections to Israel’s atomic bombs but condemns Iran despite the lack of conclusive proof that it is seeking to build any.

Washington’s real objective in its propaganda against Iran is to undermine a regime that it regards as a barrier to American ambitions to assert economic and strategic dominance throughout the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The Bush administration has never relinquished its ambition for “regime change” in Tehran and has continued to declare that all options—including a new war of aggression—remain on the table.

There continues to be a steady stream of leaks in the media indicating that Bush may attack Iran before leaving office early next year. The latest, published on the *Asia Times* web site yesterday and entitled “Bush plans Iran air strike by August”, was based on a high-level source described as a retired US career diplomat and former assistant secretary of state. Rather than using Iran’s nuclear programs as the casus belli, “the source said that the White House views the proposed air strike as a limited action to punish Iran for its involvement in Iraq”.

“Details provided by the administration raised alarm bells on Capital Hill, the source said. After receiving secret briefings on the planned air strike, Senator Diane Feinstein, Democrat of California, and Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, said they would write a *New York Times* op-ed piece ‘within days’, the source said last week, to express their opposition. Feinstein is a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee and Lugar is the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee,” the article explained.

The Bush administration has not commented on the article. Spokesmen for Feinstein and Lugar denied the story in comments to the *Raw Story* web site. No further corroboration of the claims has been published. Whatever the exact truth of the article, it does point to continuing sharp divisions within the American political establishment over the wisdom of attacking Iran. There is a distinct nervousness that Bush may be committed to a new military adventure that has potentially devastating consequences for the global interests of American capitalism.

The *Washington Post* featured a comment on Tuesday entitled “A sensible path on Iran” by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brezinski and former National Security Agency director William Odom. The article was scathing in its dismissal of the Bush administration’s strategy, declaring: “[A] heavy-handed ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ may work with donkeys but not with serious countries. The United States would have a better chance of success if the White House abandoned its threats of military action and calls for regime change.”

Brezinski and Odom warned that the US would have “to pay a price from likely Iranian reactions” to air strikes by either the US or Israel. “These would almost certainly involve destabilising the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan, and serious efforts to disrupt the flow

of oil, at the very least generating a massive increase in its already high cost. The turmoil in the Middle East resulting from a preemptive attack on Iran would hurt America and Israel, too.”

The comment proposes that the US enter into negotiations with Iran to “accommodate its security interests and ours” with a long-term view to “bring Iran back into its traditional role with the United States in stabilising the Gulf Region”. Such a strategy is rejected out of hand by the Bush administration, particularly its most militarist sections led by Vice President Dick Cheney, who regard all diplomatic efforts, including the current push for tighter UN sanctions, as a waste of time.

As far as the proponents of war are concerned, any lessening of the tensions with Iran runs the danger of allowing America’s major rivals for influence in the region to gain the upper hand. These include not only Russia and China, but also Washington’s allies in Europe and Asia, which already have considerable economic ties with Tehran, including options to exploit its huge gas and oil reserves. While Brezinski and Odom’s proposal might have appeared reasonable in a bygone period of US dominance, a reckless new war of aggression against Iran has a certain logic when US power is increasingly under challenge.

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