

How a US and International Atomic Energy Agency Deception Haunts the Nuclear Talks

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In 2008, the Bush administration and a key IAEA official agreed on a strategy of misrepresenting Iran's position on the authenticity of intelligence documents, which they used to establish an official narrative of Iran "stonewalling" the IAEA investigation. That narrative continues to shape Obama administration policy in the nuclear talks.

The accusation by US and other Western diplomats that Iran has been "stonewalling" the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) investigation of alleged past nuclear weapons work has been a familiar theme in mainstream media coverage of Iran's relations with the IAEA for years.

What remains virtually unknown, however, is how a brazen deception by the George W. Bush administration and a key official within the IAEA created the false narrative of Iranian refusal to cooperate with the IAEA and was used to justify harsh international sanctions.

The initial deception was the suggestion by the IAEA that Iran had acknowledged that the activities portrayed in controversial intelligence documents purportedly from an Iranian nuclear weapons project were real, but had claimed they were for non-nuclear purposes. The IAEA then used that brazen falsehood as a pretext to demand that Iran provide sensitive military information on its missile program – a demand that the US officials behind the scheme knew would be rejected. That ploy thus offered the Bush administration a crucial rationale for pushing for new international economic sanctions against Iran.

The story of that highly successful deception, assembled from the public record, interviews with former IAEA officials and diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, shows the conscious misleading of the public was central to US policy at a crucial turning point in the nuclear issue. It has contributed to the general consensus that Iran must be hiding past work on nuclear weapons that has led the Obama administration to insist that unless Iran satisfies the IAEA on that issue there can be no final agreement to remove the sanctions against Iran.

The origins of the IAEA deception lie in the Bush administration's determination to force Iran to cease its nuclear enrichment, which required the IAEA to maintain the image of Iran as hiding an alleged past nuclear weapons program. When then IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei negotiated a "work plan" with Iran in August 2007 to resolve a series of six issues the IAEA Safeguards Department had raised in previous years, the Bush administration was furious. Along with its key European allies, the United States warned ElBaradei when he negotiated the plan that clearing Iran of suspicion on the six issues would be unacceptable, according to [a January 2008 diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks](#).

After ElBaradei proceeded to clear away the six issues, the United States became even more aggressive toward ElBaradei. Ambassador to the IAEA Gregory Schulte sent a cable to the State Department written in early February focusing on the question of ElBaradei's handling of the intelligence documents purporting to show a covert Iranian weapons program that the Bush administration had been urging the IAEA to use to confront Iran. The United States and its allies would have to "warn the DG [director general] in very stark terms," Schulte wrote, "that . . . any hint of whitewash of Iran's weapons activities would cause irreparable harm to the Agency's relationship with major donors."

In other words, Schulte was saying Washington would have to threaten to severely reduce or even cut off its funding for the IAEA if ElBaradei refused to cooperate.

But US officials had an equally important source of leverage on IAEA policy in the person of Olli Heinonen, the Finnish head of the Safeguards Department.

Heinonen had acquired a reputation in the agency for working closely with the most powerful patron available. When he was responsible for the Middle East region in Safeguards from 2002 to 2005, he went around his boss, Deputy Director General for Safeguards Pierre Goldschmidt, and dealt directly with Director General ElBaradei, according to a former IAEA official. But after ElBaradei named Heinonen head of the Safeguards Department in 2005, the official recalled, he immediately began going around ElBaradei and dealing directly with the Americans.

In late 2007 and early 2008, as US anger toward ElBaradei peaked over his closure of the files on the six issues, Heinonen privately assured US diplomats that he was not happy with ElBaradei's decision, according to a January 2008 diplomatic cable. Another cable from Schulte in March reveals that Heinonen had assured US officials that he wanted to "press ahead" on the investigation of the intelligence documents, despite ElBaradei's reluctance to do so.

Heinonen met with Iranian officials in late January and early February 2008 to show them copies of the intelligence documents and discuss their response to them. In one of those meetings, Heinonen asked Iran's Permanent Representative to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, whether various names of people, organizations and addresses found in the documents were correct. Soltanieh confirmed that the people, organizations and addresses did exist, but added, "So what?" as he recalled to this writer in an interview in Vienna in 2009.

Soltanieh's point was that any competent fabricator of documents tries to include some details that are accurate, such as the ones in those documents shown to Iran in order to convince the targets of the fraud that they are genuine. Iran pointed out in a letter to the IAEA secretariat a few months later that it was standard procedure. The letter denied that Iran had ever acknowledged the accuracy of anything in the intelligence documents except for those incidental details.

Only after Heinonen had left the agency for a position at Harvard University did the IAEA acknowledge in its September 2011 report that the only thing Iran had "confirmed" about the documents had been the "names of people, places and organizations."

Heinonen clearly had intensive discussions with Schulte and other Western officials about the Iranian response to the documents and what to do about it. Two diplomatic cables

indicate that Heinonen agreed as a result of those discussions that the IAEA would take the position that Iran had admitted that the documents were authentic, but claimed that the activities described were not for nuclear weapons.

In [the first diplomatic cable](#), sent in mid-February, Schulte wrote that the next phase of the IAEA's should be to force Iran to "fully disclose" its past alleged nuclear weapons program and make a "confession." That cable apparently reflected agreement with Heinonen on the strategy to be pursued.

A [second cable dated March 27, 2008](#), quoted French Ambassador Francois-Xavier Deniau as declaring at a meeting of P5+1 ambassadors, "Iran has acknowledged some of the studies, while claiming they were for non-nuclear purposes."

Deniau's statement strongly suggests that Heinonen and the Americans had already adopted a very concrete formula to be used publicly to manage the issue several weeks before the drafting of the next IAEA report had begun in May. That statement accurately anticipated the wording of the Iranian position that would be used in the May 2008 IAEA report.

The language in the report was carefully chosen to mislead the reader without technically telling an outright lie. The report said Iran "did not dispute that some of the information contained in the documents was factually accurate, but said the events and activities concerned involved civil or conventional military applications."

That tortured wording avoided saying directly that the "information" that Iran had not disputed involved "events and activities" portrayed in the documents. But it was clearly intended to lead readers to that conclusion. Elsewhere, the report made it clear that the activities shown in the documents on the redesign of the reentry vehicle Shahab-3 ballistic missile and on exploding bridge wire detonators could only have been for a nuclear weapon.

Heinonen and his American handlers exploited the fact that Iran had publicly acknowledged redesigning the Shahab-3 missile and development of an exploding bridge wire (EBW).

The wording on the EBW program issue was further reinforced to drive home the deception. "Iran acknowledged that it had conducted simultaneous testing with two to three EBW detonators with a time precision of about one microsecond," the report said, adding, "Iran said, however, that this was intended for civil and conventional military applications."

Those two sentences were bound to be interpreted by the unwary reader as indicating that Iran had admitted to having done experiments involving the firing rate shown in the documents. In fact, however, as Heinonen had revealed in a briefing for member states on February 25, 2008, the document in question portrayed experiments in which EBW detonators fired at a rate of 130 nanoseconds - nearly eight times faster than the firing rate in the experiments that the report was saying that Iran had acknowledged carrying out.

In meetings of the IAEA Iran report drafting group, Heinonen made no secret that he intended to show that Iran was lying. "He revealed to the Iran report drafting group a strategy to trap the Iranians into some small lies leading to being caught up in a major contradiction," a former IAEA official familiar with those meetings, who asked to remain anonymous because of fear of retaliation by the agency, told Truthout.

IAEA officials in the drafting group who were aligned with ElBaradei were not happy with his

proposed wording, according to the former official. “There were a lot of differences over what Iran had admitted,” he recalled. “We had to agree with language we weren’t entirely comfortable with.”

As the text of the May 2008 report shows, the IAEA drafting group also insisted on juxtaposing those misleading sentences on which Heinonen was insisting with US support, with Iran’s denial that the documents were genuine and its assertions that the documents “contained numerous inconsistencies” and that “many were based on publicly available information.”

The report thus represented a compromise between the positions of Heinonen and ElBaradei, reflecting the political pressure that the United States and its allies was then putting on ElBaradei to go along with its hardline strategy.

The former IAEA official described the US political pressure on ElBaradei at that point as “intense.” The US threat of a funding cutoff was only part of it. ElBaradei also knew that his enemies in Washington and Tel Aviv were prepared to use police tactics to destroy him politically. Under Secretary of State John Bolton had tapped ElBaradei’s phone in 2004 in the hope of getting information that could be used to prevent ElBaradei from running for a third term in 2005.

Bolton failed to find anything he could use to promote that scheme, but ElBaradei’s enemies in Washington and Tel Aviv also spread rumors aimed at smearing him as an Iranian agent. One such story, which ElBaradei recalled in his memoirs, had Iran depositing \$600,000 in a bank account under ElBaradei’s wife’s name in Switzerland. Yet another such rumor was that his wife, Aida, an Egyptian, was actually Iranian.

ElBaradei was also following events in Egypt, where opposition newspapers were being harassed and hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members were being jailed by the Mubarak regime. He knew he would one day want to return to Egypt and he did not want to be viewed by the US government as anti-American.

But the US-Heinonen strategy had an even bigger objective in mind – to use the insinuation that Iran had admitted to the activities that the documents portrayed as a pretext to demand that Iran provide the IAEA with highly sensitive information on both its missile and conventional weapons programs. At two meetings with Iranian officials in August 2008, Heinonen insisted that Iran share with IAEA experts the details of its work on exploding bridge wire technology as well as on the redesign of the Shahab-3 missile in order to prove its innocence.

The [September 2008 IAEA report](#) revealed the demand: “The Agency proposed discussions with Iranian experts on the contents of the engineering reports examining in detail modeling studies related to the effects of various physical parameters on the re-entry body from time of launch of the missile to payload detonation.” It explained that the discussions would be “aimed at ascertaining whether these studies were associated with nuclear related activities or, as Iran has asserted, related only to conventional military activities.”

Heinonen later denied publicly that he had ever demanded the transfer of classified conventional Iranian military data to the IAEA. But a senior IAEA official acknowledged to me in a September 2009 interview that the agency was indeed demanding that Iran turn over such information.

Predictably, Iran objected, in [a letter to the IAEA secretariat on September 5, 2008](#), that the IAEA demand represented an unwarranted intrusion on its conventional military security, as well as a blatant violation of the agency's statute. Iran informed ElBaradei that it was refusing to participate in future meetings on the subject of "possible military dimensions" as long as that demand was on the table.

That was exactly what the Bush administration and Heinonen were hoping for.

US Ambassador Schulte drafted a set of talking points he proposed to be used by the entire P5+1 for all interactions with the IAEA secretariat. As revealed in [a diplomatic cable in January 2009](#), the key points expressed concern that Iran had "refused to cooperate with the IAEA's investigation in a full and substantive manner" and declared, "We do not accept Iran's blockage of the IAEA investigation."

The Obama administration continued the Bush administration's policy of protesting Iran's alleged refusal to cooperate with the IAEA as a means of building support for its real objective - to pressure Iran to suspend enrichment indefinitely. On March 3, 2009, a statement on behalf of all six powers to the IAEA board called on Iran to "cooperate fully with the IAEA by providing the Agency such access and information that it requests" to resolve the "possible military dimensions" issue.

The demand that Iran "cooperate fully with the IAEA" on the "possible military dimensions" became part of the Obama administration's official mantra on Iran, along with the charge that Iran had failed to do so. That charge was even included in UN Security Council Resolution 1929 in June 2010. The administration repeated it in the meetings of the IAEA Board of Governors.

Senior administration officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry have said that Iran must "come clean" about its past nuclear weapons work as part of the comprehensive settlement that is now being negotiated. Israel and its supporters in Congress have pressed that demand on the Obama administration vehemently. The clever dissimulation by the Bush administration and Heinonen continues to cast a long shadow over the talks.

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