

Iran and the IAEA: A Trove of New Fake Evidence.

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The first question in last Saturday night's Republican debate on foreign policy dealt with Iran, and a newly published report by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The report, which raised renewed concern about the "possible existence of undeclared nuclear facilities and material in Iran," struck a darker tone than previous assessments. But it was carefully hedged. On the debate platform, however, any ambiguity was lost.

One of the moderators said that the I.A.E.A. report had provided "additional credible evidence that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon" and asked what various candidates, upon winning the Presidency, would do to stop Iran. Herman Cain said he would assist those who are trying to overthrow the government. Newt Gingrich said he would coordinate with the Israeli government and maximize covert operations to block the Iranian weapons program. Mitt Romney called the state of Iran's nuclear program Obama's "greatest failing, from a foreign-policy standpoint" and added, "Look, one thing you can know ... and that is if we reelect Barack Obama Iran will have a nuclear weapon." The Iranian bomb was a sure thing Saturday night.

I've been reporting on Iran and the bomb for *The New Yorker* for the past decade, with a focus on the repeatedly inability of the best and the brightest of the Joint Special Operations Command to find definitive evidence of a nuclear-weapons production program in Iran. The goal of the high-risk American covert operations was to find something physical—a "smoking calutron," as a knowledgeable official [once told me](#)—to show the world that Iran was working on warheads at an undisclosed site, to make the evidence public, and then to attack and destroy the site.

The *Times* reported, in its [lead story](#) the day after the report came out, that I.A.E.A. investigators "have amassed a trove of new evidence that, they say, makes a 'credible' case" that Iran may be carrying out nuclear-weapons activities. The newspaper quoted a Western diplomat as declaring that "the level of detail is unbelievable.... The report describes virtually all the steps to make a nuclear warhead and the progress Iran has achieved in each of those steps. It reads like a menu." The *Times* set the tone for much of the coverage. (A [second Times story](#) that day on the I.A.E.A. report noted, more cautiously, that "it is true that the basic allegations in the report are not substantially new, and have been discussed by experts for years.")

But how definitive, or transformative, were the findings? The I.A.E.A. said it had continued in recent years "to receive, collect and evaluate information relevant to possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program" and, as a result, it has been able "to refine its analysis." The net effect has been to create "more concern." But Robert Kelley, a retired

I.A.E.A. director and nuclear engineer who previously spent more than thirty years with the Department of Energy's nuclear-weapons program, told me that he could find very little new information in the I.A.E.A. report. He noted that hundreds of pages of material appears to come from a single source: a laptop computer, allegedly supplied to the I.A.E.A. by a Western intelligence agency, whose provenance could not be established. Those materials, and others, "were old news," Kelley said, and known to many journalists. "I wonder why this same stuff is now considered 'new information' by the same reporters."

A nuanced assessment of the I.A.E.A. report was published by the Arms Control Association (A.C.A.), a nonprofit whose mission is to encourage public support for effective arms control. The A.C.A. noted that the I.A.E.A. did "reinforce what the nonproliferation community has recognized for some times: that Iran engaged in various nuclear weapons development activities until 2003, then stopped many of them, but continued others." (The American intelligence community reached the same conclusion in a still classified 2007 estimate.) The I.A.E.A.'s report "suggests," the A.C.A. paper said, that Iran "is working to shorten the timeframe to build the bomb once and if it makes that decision. But it remains apparent that a nuclear-armed Iran is still not imminent nor is it inevitable." Greg Thielmann, a former State Department and Senate Intelligence Committee analyst who was one of the authors of the A.C.A. assessment, told me, "There is troubling evidence suggesting that studies are still going on, but there is nothing that indicates that Iran is really building a bomb." He added, "Those who want to drum up support for a bombing attack on Iran sort of aggressively misrepresented the report."

Joseph Cirincione, the president of the Ploughshare Fund, a disarmament group, who serves on Hillary Clinton's International Security Advisory Board, said, "I was briefed on most of this stuff several years ago at the I.A.E.A. headquarters in Vienna. There's little new in the report. Most of this information is well known to experts who follow the issue." Cirincione noted that "post-2003, the report only cites computer modelling and a few other experiments." (A senior I.A.E.A. official similarly told me, "I was underwhelmed by the information.")

The report did note that its on-site camera inspection process of Iran's civilian nuclear enrichment facilities—mandated under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a signatory—"continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material." In other words, all of the low enriched uranium now known to be produced inside Iran is accounted for; if highly enriched uranium is being used for the manufacture of a bomb, it would have to have another, unknown source.

The shift in tone at the I.A.E.A. seems linked to a change at the top. The I.A.E.A.'s report had extra weight because the Agency has had a reputation for years as a reliable arbiter on Iran. Mohammed ElBaradei, who retired as the I.A.E.A.'s Director General two years ago, was viewed internationally, although not always in Washington, as an honest broker—a view that led to the awarding of a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. ElBaradei's replacement is Yukiya Amano of Japan. Late last year, a classified U.S. Embassy cable from Vienna, the site of the I.A.E.A. headquarters, described Amano as being "ready for prime time." According to [the cable](#), which was obtained by WikiLeaks, in a meeting in September, 2009, with Glyn Davies, the American permanent representative to the I.A.E.A., said, "Amano reminded Ambassador on several occasions that he would need to make concessions to the G-77 [the group of developing countries], which correctly required him to be fair-minded and independent, but that he was solidly in the U.S. court on every strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program." The cable added

that Amano’s “willingness to speak candidly with U.S. interlocutors on his strategy ... bodes well for our future relationship.”

It is possible, of course, that Iran has simply circumvented the reconnaissance efforts of America and the I.A.E.A., perhaps even building Dick Cheney’s nightmare: a hidden underground nuclear-weapons fabrication facility. Iran’s track record with the I.A.E.A. has been far from good: its leadership began construction of its initial uranium facilities in the nineteen-eighties without informing the Agency, in violation of the nonproliferation treaty. Over the next decade and a half, under prodding from ElBaradei and the West, the Iranians began acknowledging their deceit and opened their enrichment facilities, and their records, to I.A.E.A. inspectors.

The new report, therefore, leaves us where we’ve been since 2002, when George Bush declared Iran to be a member of the Axis of Evil—with lots of belligerent talk but no definitive evidence of a nuclear-weapons program. Read more <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2011/11/iran-and-the-iaea.html#ixzz1e87pdqyN>

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