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The Mysterious Laptop Documents: "Evidence" of Iran Nuclear Weapons Program May Be Fraudulent

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Since 2007, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – with the support of the United States, Israel and European allies UK, France and Germany – has been demanding that Iran explain a set of purported internal documents portraying a covert Iranian military program of research and development of nuclear weapons. The "laptop documents," supposedly obtained from a stolen Iranian computer by an unknown source and given to US intelligence in 2004, include a series of drawings of a missile re-entry vehicle that appears to be an effort to accommodate a nuclear weapon, as well as reports on high explosives testing for what appeared to be a detonator for a nuclear weapon.

In one report after another, the IAEA has suggested that Iran has failed to cooperate with its inquiry into that alleged research, and that the agency, therefore, cannot verify that it has not diverted nuclear material to military purposes.

That issue remains central to US policy toward Iran. The Obama administration says there can be no diplomatic negotiations with Iran unless Iran satisfies the IAEA fully in regard to the allegations derived from the documents that it had covert nuclear weapons program.

That position is based on the premise that the intelligence documents that Iran has been asked to explain are genuine. The evidence now available, however, indicates that they are fabrications.

The drawings of the Iranian missile warhead that were said by the IAEA to show an intent to accommodate a nuclear weapon actually depict a missile design that Iran is now known to have already abandoned in favor of an improved model by the time the technical drawings were allegedly made. And one of the major components of the purported Iranian military research program allegedly included a project labeled with a number that turns out to have been assigned by Iran's civilian nuclear authority years before the covert program is said to have been initiated.

The former head of the agency's safeguards department, Olli Heinonen, who shaped its approach to the issue of the intelligence documents from 2005 and 2010, has offered no real explanation for these anomalies in recent interviews with Truthout.

These telltale indicators of fraud bring into question the central pillar of the case against Iran and raise more fundamental questions about the handling of the Iranian nuclear issue by the IAEA, the United States and its key European allies.

Drawings of the Wrong Missile Warhead

In mid-July 2005, in an effort to get the IAEA fully behind the Bush administration's effort to refer the Iranian nuclear dossier to the United Nations Security Council, Robert Joseph, US undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, made a formal presentation on the purported Iranian nuclear weapons program documents to the agency's leading officials in Vienna. Joseph flashed excerpts from the documents on the screen, giving special attention to the series of technical drawings or "schematics" showing 18 different ways of fitting an unidentified payload into the re-entry vehicle or "warhead" of Iran's medium-range ballistic missile, the Shahab-3.

When IAEA analysts were allowed to study the documents, however, they discovered that those schematics were based on a re-entry vehicle that the analysts knew had already been abandoned by the Iranian military in favor of a new, improved design. The warhead shown in the schematics had the familiar "dunce cap" shape of the original North Korean No Dong missile, which Iran had acquired in the mid-1990s, as former IAEA Safeguards Department Chief Olli Heinonen confirmed to this writer in an interview on November 5. But when Iran had flight tested a new missile in mid-2004, it did not have that dunce cap warhead, but a new "triconic" or "baby bottle" shape, which was more aerodynamic than the one on the original Iranian missile.

The laptop documents had depicted the wrong re-entry vehicle being redesigned.

When I asked Heinonen, now a senior fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center, why Iran's purported secret nuclear weapons research program would redesign the warhead of a missile that the Iranian military had already decided to replace with an improved model, he suggested that the group that had done the schematics had no relationship with the Iranian missile program. "It looks from that information that this group was working with this individual," said Heinonen, referring to Dr. Mohsen Fakrizadeh, the man named in the documents as heading the research program. "It was not working with the missile program."

Heinonen's claim that the covert nuclear weapon program had no link to the regular missile program is not supported by the intelligence documents themselves. The IAEA describes what is purported to be a one-page letter from Fakrizadeh to the Shahid Hemat Industrial Group dated March 3, 2003, "seeking assistance with the prompt transfer of data" for the work on redesigning the re-entry vehicle.

Shahid Hemat, which is part of the Iranian military's Defense Industries Organization, was involved in testing the engine for the Shahab-3 and, in particular, in working on aerodynamic properties and control systems for Iranian missiles, all of which were reported in the US news media. "Project 11" was the code name given to the purported re-entry vehicle project.

Heinonen also suggested that the program's engineers could have been ordered to redesign the older Shahab-3 model before the decision was made by the missile program to switch to a newer model and that it couldn't change its work plan once it was decided.

However, according to Mike Elleman, lead author of the most authoritative study of the Iranian missile program thus far, published by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) last May, Iran introduced the major innovations in the design of the medium-range missile, including a longer, lighter airframe and the new warhead shape, over a period of two to five years. Elleman, told me in an interview that the redesign of the re-entry vehicle must have begun in 2002 at the latest.

The schematics on the laptop documents' redesigned warhead were dated March-April 2003, according to the IAEA report of May 2008.

Heinonen's explanation assumes that the Iranian military ordered an engineer to organize a project to redesign the warhead on its intermediate-range ballistic missile to accommodate a nuclear payload, but kept the project in the dark about its plans to replace the Shahab-3 with a completely new and improved model.

That assumption appears wholly implausible, because the reason for the shift to the new missile, according to the IISS study, was that the Shahab-3, purchased from North Korea in the early to mid-1990s, had a range of only 800 to 1,000 km, depending on the weight of the payload. Thus, it was incapable of reaching Israel. The new missile, later named the Ghadr-1, could carry a payload of conventional high-explosives 1,500 to 1,600 kilometers, bringing Israel within the reach of an Iranian missile for the first time.

The missile warhead anomaly is a particularly telling sign of fraud, because someone intending to fabricate such technical drawings of a re-entry vehicle could not have known that Iran had abandoned the Shahab-3 in favor of the more advanced Ghadr-1 until after mid-August 2004. As the IISS study points out, the August 11, 2004, test launch was the first indication to the outside world that a new missile with a triconic warhead had been developed. Before that test, Elleman told me, "No information was available that they were modifying the warhead."

After that test, however, it would have been too late to redo the re-entry vehicle studies, which would have the biggest impact on news media coverage and political opinion.

Iranian statements about the Shahab-3 missile would have been misleading for anyone attempting to fabricate these schematics. The IISS study recalls that Iran had said in early 2001 that the Shahab-3 had entered "serial production" and declared in July 2003 that it was "operational." The IISS study observes, however, that the announcement came only after the US invasion of Iraq, when Iran felt an urgent need to claim an operational missile capability. The study says it is "very dubious" that the missile was ever produced in significant numbers.

Skepticism and Resistance at the IAEA

A second inconsistency between the laptop documents and the established facts emerged only in 2008. At a briefing for IAEA member states in February 2008, Heinonen displayed an organization chart of the purported research program, showing a "Project 5" with two sub-projects: "Project 5/13" for uranium conversion and "Project 5/15" for uranium ore processing. Kimia Maadan, a private Iranian firm, is shown to be running "Project 5."

One of the key documents in the collection, a one-page flow sheet for a uranium-conversion process, dated May 2003, with Kimia Maadan's name on it, is marked "Project 5/13."

Bush administration hardliners and the IAEA safeguard department had been convinced in the 2004-2005 period that Kimia Maadan was a front for the Iranian military. In a 2005 report, the IAEA questioned how that company, with such "limited experience in ore processing," could have established an ore processing plant at Gchine in such a short time from 2000 to mid-2001 on its own.

But in January 2008, Iran provided documents to the IAEA showing that Kimia Maadan had actually been created by the civilian Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) in 2000 solely to carry out a contract to design, build and put into operation an ore-processing facility. The documents also established that the firm's core staff consisted entirely of experts who had previously worked for AEOI's Ore Processing Center and that the conceptual design and other technical information had been provided to Kimia Maadan by AEOI.

But the most explosive new evidence provided by Iran showed that the code number of "Project 5/15" on ore processing, supposedly assigned by the Iranian military's secret nuclear weapon research program, had actually been assigned by the AEOI more than two years before the purported nuclear weapons program had been started. In the context of the documents on Kimia Maadan's relationship with AEOI, the IAEA report of February 2008 acknowledged, "A decision to construct a UOC [uranium ore concentration] plant at Gchine, known as 'project 5/15,' was made August 25, 1999."

An unpublished paper by the IAEA safeguards department, leaked to the media and the Washington, DC-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in 2009, identified early 2002 as the formal beginning of what it called the Iranian military's "warhead development program."

Asked about this contradiction, Heinonen told me he couldn't answer the question, because he did not recall the specific dates involved.

After the IAEA had acquired that new evidence of fraud in January 2008, an IAEA official familiar with the internal debate inside the agency told me that some IAEA officials had demanded that the agency distance itself publicly from the intelligence documents. But IAEA reports made no concession to those demands. Instead, beginning with the May 2008 report, the agency began to use language implying that the documents were considered reliable.

Behind the scenes, a conflict was about to boil over between Heinonen and then IAEA Director General Mohammed ElBaradei, who was skeptical about the authenticity of the laptop documents and refused to give them any official IAEA endorsement. In late 2008, Heinonen began pushing ElBaradei to approve publication of his department's favorable assessment of the intelligence documents, which concluded that Iran had done research and development on nuclear weapons components and speculated that it was continuing to do so.

But ElBaradei refused to do so and in August 2009, diplomats from the UK, France and Germany, who were supporting Heinonen's view of the documents, leaked to Reuters and The Associated Press that, for nearly a year, ElBaradei had been suppressing "credible" evidence of Iran's covert work on nuclear weapons.

ElBaradei responded to those political pressures to publish the safeguards department speculative study in an interview with The Hindu on October 1, 2009, in which he declared, "The IAEA is not making any judgment at all whether Iran even had weaponisation studies before because there is a major question of authenticity of the documents."

Evidence of Israel's Role

The origin of the laptop documents may never be proven conclusively, but the accumulated evidence points to Israel as the source. As early as 1995, the head of the Israel Defense Forces' military intelligence research and assessment division, Yaakov Amidror, tried unsuccessfully to persuade his American counterparts that Iran was planning to "go nuclear." By 2003-2004, Mossad's reporting on the Iranian nuclear program was viewed by high-ranking CIA officials as an effort to pressure the Bush administration into considering military action against Iran's nuclear sites, according to Israeli sources cited by a pro-Israeli news service.

In the summer of 2003, Israel's international intelligence agency, Mossad, had established an aggressive program aimed at exerting influence on the Iran nuclear issue by leaking alleged intelligence to governments and the news media, as Israeli officials acknowledged to journalists Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins. According to the book, "The Nuclear Jihadist," as part of the program, Mossad sometimes passed on purported Iranian documents supposedly obtained by Israeli spies inside Iran.

German sources have suggested that the intelligence documents were conveyed to the US government, directly or indirectly, by a group that had been collaborating closely with Mossad. Soon after Secretary of State Colin Powell made the existence of the laptop documents public in November 2004, Karsten Voight, the coordinator of German-American cooperation in the German Foreign Ministry, was quoted in The Wall Street Journal as saying that they had been transferred by an Iranian "dissident group." A second German source familiar with the case was even more explicit. "I can assure you," the source told me in 2007, "that the documents came from the Iranian resistance organization." That was a reference to the Mujahideen-E-Khalq (MEK), also known as the People's Mujahideen of Iran, the armed Iranian exile group designated as a terrorist organization by the US State Department.

The National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI), the political arm of the MEK, was generally credited by the news media with having revealed the existence of the Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak in an August 2002 press conference in Washington, DC. Later, however, IAEA, Israeli and Iranian dissident sources all said that the NCRI had gotten the intelligence on the sites from Mossad.

An IAEA official told Seymour Hersh that the Israelis were behind the revelation of the sites and two journalists from Der Spiegel reported the same thing. So did an adviser to an Iranian monarchist group, speaking to a writer for The New Yorker. That episode was not isolated, but was part of a broader pattern of Israeli cooperation with the MEK in providing intelligence intended to influence the CIA and the IAEA. Israeli authors Melman and Javadanfar, who claimed to have good sources in Mossad, wrote in their 2007 book that Israeli intelligence had "laundered" intelligence to the IAEA by providing it to Iranian opposition groups, especially the NCRI.

Israeli officials also went to extraordinary lengths to publicize the story of covert Iranian experiments on a key component of a nuclear weapon, which was one of messages the intelligence documents conveyed. As a result of satellite intelligence brought to the attention of the IAEA in 2004 by Undersecretary of State John Bolton, the IAEA requested two separate investigations at the main Iran military research center at Parchin. The investigations, in January 2005 and November 2005, were aimed at examining the charge that Iran was using facilities at Parchin to test high explosives used in the detonation of a nuclear weapon. In each investigation, the IAEA investigators were allowed complete

freedom to search and take environmental samples at any five buildings in the complex and their surroundings. But they failed to find any evidence of any Iranian nuclear weapons-related experiments.

At that point, Israeli intelligence came up with a new story. Hersh reported that, earlier in 2006, Mossad had given the CIA an intelligence report – purportedly from one of its agents inside Iran – claiming that the Iranian military had been "testing trigger mechanisms" for a nuclear weapon. The experiment supposedly involved simulating a nuclear explosion without using any nuclear material, so that it could not be detected by the IAEA. But there were no specifics on which to base an IAEA investigation – no test site specified and no diagrams – and CIA officials told Hersh they could not learn anything more about the identity of the alleged Israeli agent.

The CIA evidently did not regard the Israeli claim as credible, because the intelligence community issued a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in late 2007, which said that Iran had ended all work on nuclear weapons in 2003 and had not restarted it. Israel expressed dismay at the US intelligence estimate, but Israeli officials admitted that the official position that Iran was still working actively on a nuclear weapon was based on an assumption rather than any hard evidence.

Israel encountered yet another problem in its effort to promote the covert Iranian nuclear weapon narrative. The IAEA analysts doubted that Iran would be able to develop a nuclear weapon small enough to fit into the missile it had tested in 2004 without foreign assistance, as David Albright, former IAEA contract officer and director of the Institute for Science and International Security, wrote in a letter to The New York Times in November 2005.

Sometime between February and May, however, yet another purported Iranian document conveniently materialized that addressed the problem of the US NIE and the "small bomb" issue noted by Albright. The document was a long, Farsi-language report purporting to be about the testing of a system to detonate high explosives in hemispherical arrangement. Based on the new document, the IAEA safeguard department concluded that the "implosion system" on which it assumed Iran was working "could be contained within a payload container believed to be small enough to fit into the re-entry body chamber of the Shahab-3 missile."

The document was given to the IAEA by a "Member State," which was not identified in the leaked excerpts from an unpublished IAEA report describing it. But Albright, who knows Heinonen well, told me in a September 2008 interview, that the state in question was "probably Israel."

The day before the Reuters and Associated Press stories attacking ElBaradei over his refusal to publish the report appeared in August 2009, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported that Israel "has been striving to pressure the IAEA through friendly nations and have it release the censored annex." The operation was being handled by the director general of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission and the Foreign Ministry, according to the report. The Israeli objective, Haaretz reported, was to "prove that the Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons is continuing, contrary to the claims that Tehran stopped its nuclear program in 2003."

Rethinking the Case Against Iran

Once the intelligence documents that have been used to indict Iran as plotting to build nuclear weapons are discounted as fabrications likely perpetrated by a self-interested party, there is no solid basis for the US policy of trying to coerce Iran into ending all uranium enrichment. And there is no reason for insisting that Iran must explain the allegations in those documents to the IAEA as a condition for any future US-Iran negotiations.

News coverage of the purported intelligence documents over the past few years has created yet another false narrative that distorts public discourse on the subject. Almost entirely ignored is the possibility that the real aim of Iran's nuclear program is to maintain a bargaining chip with the United States, and to have a breakout capability to serve as a deterrent to a US or Israeli attack on Iran.

The evidence that documents at the center of the case for a covert Iranian nuclear weapons program are fraudulent suggests the need for a strategic reset on Iran policy. It raises both the possibility and the need for serious exploration of a diplomatic solution for the full range of issues dividing the two countries, which is the only sensible strategy for ensuring that Iran stays a non-nuclear state.
