

The US and Iran: A Manufactured Crisis

Part 1

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No one knows what will emerge ultimately from the talks beginning in Geneva Oct. 1 between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany on the matter of the Tehran government's nuclear program.

Iran says it looks forward to the talks and promises to be forthcoming. But judging by the stance of the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany last week at the UN conferences in New York and the G20 meeting in Pittsburgh, draconian sanctions may be enacted against Iran in a few months. This would result in yet another crisis that the world doesn't need just now.

Russia and China < which hold veto power in the Security Council that can weaken or prevent additional sanctions < have up to now resisted the Obama Administration's drive for tough new UN punishments. President Barack Obama met separately during the week with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Chinese President Hu Jintao in an effort to obtain their agreement to threaten more stringent sanctions should Iran procrastinate during the talks.

The White House later suggested to the press that Medvedev may be coming around to Obama's point of view, but this seems to be based on very skimpy evidence < a remark that "in some cases sanctions are inevitable." Hu evidently didn't even go that far. China opposes sanctions in principle as a means of resolving international disputes.

Moscow and Beijing do not subscribe to the negative depiction of Iran promoted by Washington, Tel Aviv, London, Paris and Bonn. They understand the situation to be far more complex than the U.S. and its allies publicly acknowledge.

The Iran question suddenly took center stage Sept. 25 during a week of hectic political activity. The White house set up a hastily arranged and theatrically produced press conference at the start of the G20 meeting in order to detonate a political bombshell intended to destroy Tehran's contention that it is only interested in nuclear power, not nuclear weapons.

The conference opened with Obama standing at the microphone with French President Nicholas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown standing solemnly to his left and right. It was explained that German Chancellor Angela Merkel would have joined the trio but was delayed.

Obama then declared that Iran had for several years been secretly building an underground

plant in mountainous terrain to manufacture nuclear fuel near the city of Qom about 100 miles from Tehran, in addition to the plant and facilities in Natanz already known to the world. He suggested the new plant was intended to produce weapons without the world's knowledge.

Obama then charged that ³Iran's decision to build yet another nuclear facility without notifying the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] represents a direct challenge to the basic compact at the center of the non-proliferation regime Iran is breaking rules that all nations must follow and threatening the stability and security of the region and the world.² Refusal to ³come clean,² he said, ³is going to lead to confrontation.²

Sarkozy and Brown followed Obama and seemed to go even further than the American leader in denouncing Iran, explicitly demanding harder sanctions. Said Brown: ³The level of deception by the Iranian government, and the scale of what we believe is the breach of international commitments, will shock and anger the entire international community.²

The New York Times reported that ³after months of talking about the need for engagement, Mr. Obama appears to have made a leap toward viewing tough new sanctions against Iran as an inevitability American officials said that they expected the announcement to make it easier to build a case for international sanctions.²

The majority of House and Senate members have long been critical of Iran's government and the new allegations have only substantiated their suspicions. Right wing Florida Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the leading Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, declared: "The U.S. and other countries must immediately impose crippling sanctions on the Iranian regime, including cutting off Iran's imports of gasoline. The world cannot stand by and watch the nightmare of a nuclear-armed Iran become reality." Massachusetts Democrat John Kerry, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated "now is the time to supplement engagement with more robust international sanctions."

As intended, the hyped disclosure created headlines around the world. It probably convinced many Americans, already primed to detest Iran, that Tehran is building nuclear bombs to obliterate the U.S. and Israel. This is not an unlikely conclusion for many people to accept after 30 years of Washington's incessant campaign to demonize the government that overthrew and replaced America's puppet, the dreaded Shah of Iran. The U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Iran after this act of lèse majesté and the subsequent ³hostage crisis,² and has nourished a grudge to this day.

If push does come to shove with Iran it is important to remember how effortless it was to hoodwink the majority of American politicians and the masses of people into backing a completely unnecessary war against Iraq. As in the buildup to the unjust invasion of Iraq, today's U.S. corporate mass media is playing its principal part to perfection < uncritically echoing government distortions about the danger of Iran's nonexistent nuclear weapons. The Iran situation is different, but yet similar in terms of mass public manipulation and the possibility of a future confrontation getting out of hand.

Can this be, once again, a situation of high-stakes geopolitics where things are not as they seem? We think so. Let's look at the immediate charge against Iran, based on the ³revelations² of the last week, then take on the bigger picture in Part 2.

The ³shocking² news may have been delivered with a sense of surprise and high urgency,

but U.S. intelligence agencies, joined by their counterparts in some allied countries, were aware since 2006 that Iran was constructing a second uranium processing plant that still remains under construction and is not operational. According to a Sept. 26 article circulated by the McClatchy newspaper group quoting a U.S. intelligence official, "There was dialogue with allies from a very early point."²

Bush Administration Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell first informed Obama about the facility soon after he won election. He has been kept up to date since then. Before going public with the information last week, the president saw to it that several other governments were told in advance, as was the IAEA and others.

Washington officials claimed Iran became aware ³in late spring² that the U.S. was spying on the ³secret² facility. They said Iran then informed the International Atomic Energy Agency Sept. 21 about the existence of its project, implying Tehran did so because its cover was blown. In a statement Sept. 24 the IAEA acknowledged that Tehran had informed them that a ³pilot fuel enrichment plant is under construction in the country,² and that it ³also understands from Iran that no nuclear material has been introduced into the facility.²

Iran insisted to the Vienna-based IAEA and the world that the enrichment plant under construction is designed only for fueling nuclear power installations. Soon after Obama's G20 speech, Iran's Atomic Energy Organization declared the new ³semi-industrial enrichment fuel facility² was ³within the framework of International Atomic Energy Agency's regulations.² Press reports said ³The head of Iran's nuclear program suggested UN inspectors would be allowed to visit the site.² The invitation was extended before Washington's demand that it do so.

A quite unruffled Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appeared at a press conference in New York after Obama's disclosures. He seemed to regard the American president's allegations, and the staged manner in which they were delivered, not only the making of a mountain out of a molehill but an act of bad faith just before the talks are to begin, suggesting non-threateningly that Obama will come to regret his confrontational demeanor.

Ahmadinejad told the press that the plant in question wouldn't be operational for 18 more months and that it did not violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). He went further and said nuclear weapons "are against humanity [and] they are inhumane," comments in keeping with his recent calls for eliminating all nuclear weapons. The Iranian leader also said that Iran informed the IAEA about the plant only a few days ago instead of when ground was broken because construction had reached the stage where it should be reported, not because it found out that a U.S. spy agency was watching.

What are we to make of this? First it must be understood there is a complex dispute over the IAEA's safeguard provisions governing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Iran considers itself to be in total compliance with the NPT, and this appears to be true. Inter-Press Service reporter Jim Lobe wrote Sept. 25 that ³Under the basic Safeguards Agreement of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of which Iran is a signatory, member states are required to declare their nuclear facilities and designs at least 180 days before introducing nuclear materials there.²

According to an article in the Sept. 26 New York Times by Neil MacFarquhar, ³Tehran's stance hinges on different interpretations of the agency's regulations, said Graham Allison,

the director of Harvard University's Belfer Center and an Iran nuclear expert.

³For two decades, the agency required Iran to report only when nuclear material [for uranium enrichment] was introduced to a facility. By 2003 it rescinded that, in line with the guidelines for most [but not all] countries, demanding reporting when construction began, Mr. Allison said. But the agency never declared Iran out of compliance when Tehran claimed the old agreement was still in place.²

In talking to the press after Obama's speech, Ahmadinejad said that the new facility would be completed in 18 months, so under Iran's understanding of its responsibilities, its notification was a year in advance. The U.S. maintains that Iran informed the IAEA when it learned U.S. spy agencies had become aware of the plant, but if that were so, why did Teheran wait three months before contacting the nuclear agency?

"What we did was completely legal, according to the law,² the Iranian president said. ³We have informed the agency, the agency will come and take a look and produce a report and it's nothing new." According to the Associated Press Teheran's notice to the IAEA specified that the enrichment level would be up to 5%, suitable only for peaceful purposes. Weapons-grade material is more than 90% enriched.²

The AP also noted that the IAEA now ³says Iran is obliged to make such a notification when it begins design of such facilities² and that ³a government cannot unilaterally abandon such an agreement.² This is confusing, of course. But since Iran was never designated as noncompliant and was allowed to proceed under the previous rules after it registered its rejection, the thunderous criticism emanating from the U.S., Britain and France appears to have no merit.

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