

U.S. Instigated Iran's Nuclear Program 30 Years Ago

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Pacific News Editor's Note: U.S. statements about Iran's nuclear program don't fit the facts, the writer says, and conveniently fail to mention past U.S. efforts to promote a nuclear Iran. William O. Beeman is professor of anthropology and Middle East studies at Brown University. He is author of "The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullahs': How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other" (Greenwood, 2005).



White House staff members, who are trying to prevent Iran from developing its own nuclear energy capacity and who refuse to take military action against Iran "off the table," have conveniently forgotten that the United States was the midwife to the Iranian nuclear program 30 years ago.

Every aspect of Iran's current nuclear development was approved and encouraged by Washington in the 1970s. President Gerald Ford offered Iran a full nuclear cycle in 1976. Moreover, the only Iranian reactor currently about to become operative, the reactor in Bushire (also known as Bushehr), was started before the Iranian revolution with U.S. approval, and cannot produce weapons-grade plutonium.

The Bushire reactor — a "light water" reactor — produces Pu (plutonium) 240, Pu241 and Pu242. Although these isotopes could theoretically be weaponized, the process is extremely long and complicated, and also untried. To date, no nuclear weapon has ever been produced with plutonium produced with the kind of reactor at Bushire. Moreover, the plant must be completely shut down to extract the fuel rods, making the process immediately open to detection and inspection. Other possible reactors in Iran are far in the future.

The American push for Iran's nuclear development was carried out with great enthusiasm. Professor Ahmad Sadri, chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Lake Forest College in Illinois, was a young man in Iran when the United States was touting nuclear power facilities to the government of the Shah. In the 1970s he remembers seeing the American display at the Tehran International Exhibition, which was "dedicated to the single theme of extolling the virtues of atomic energy and the feasibility of its transfer to Iran." Sadri also remembers an encounter with Octave J. Du Temple, executive director emeritus of the American Nuclear Society, who fondly reminisced about half a dozen trips in the early 1970s to Tehran and Shiraz in order to participate in conferences and summits on "transfer of nuclear technology."

Washington international lawyer Donald Weadon, who was active in Iran during this period, points out that after 1972 and the oil crisis, the United States was rabidly pursuing investment opportunities in Iran, including selling nuclear power plants. "The Iranians were

wooded hard with the prospect of nuclear power from trusted, U.S.-backed suppliers,” he says, “with the prospect of the reservation of significant revenues from oil exports for foreign and domestic investment.”

American dissimulation on this point reveals some interesting motives on Washington’s part. Iran under the Shah was as much of a threat to its neighbors (including Iraq) as it might be said to be today. Its nuclear ambitions then could have been inflated and denigrated in exactly the same way they are being inflated and denigrated today, but the United States was blissfully unconcerned. The big difference is that Iran is now perceived to be a threat to Israel, and this fuels much of the threat of military action.

Even those who admit that the United States helped start Iran’s current nuclear development can produce only two factors that make a difference in how Iran should be treated today as opposed to the 1970s. The most recent factor is President Ahmadinejad’s widely denounced remarks attacking Israel. The second, older factor is Iran’s alleged concealment of nuclear energy development activities in the past.

President Ahmadinejad’s remarks have little or no connection with any probable action on Iran’s part regarding Israel. His pronouncements were designed primarily to shore up support from extremist elements among his own revolutionary supporters. Moreover, Ahmadinejad has no control over Iran’s foreign policy or its nuclear energy program, and his views are not embraced by Iran’s clerical leaders.

The second accusation, that Iran has “regularly hidden information about its nuclear program” is equally specious. Much of what the United States has called “concealment” was never concealed at all, when the reports of the United Nations inspection team are examined. Many of the U.S. charges about removing topsoil and bulldozing material at some of the research sites are unsupported by the United Nations. Moreover, even if one concedes that Iran did conceal some processes, this activity started 18-20 years ago, when the revolution was still young and Ayatollah Khomeini was still alive, under completely different political actors than are in power today.

Indeed, whatever Iran did or didn’t do in the past, they are in compliance with the NNPT at present. Indeed, there would be no way to accuse them of anything if they had not been so compliant about responding to NNPT requests for information. The NNPT grants all signatories the right to pursue nuclear research for peaceful purposes of precisely the kind in which Iran is currently engaged.

The mantra “Iran must not get nuclear weapons” has been repeated so often now that most people have come to believe that Iran has them or is getting them. This implication is completely unproven. The tragedy would be that in the end, U.S. hostility may goad Iran into a real nuclear weapons program.

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