

Was There Ever an Iranian Nuclear Weapons Program?

A review of the evidence points to Israeli and MEK disinformation, not an open-and-shut case.

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Donald Trump's decision to pull out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has set the stage for another Iran crisis, has opened a new round of domestic political struggle, as Democrats in Congress, the anti-Trump television networks, and the tattered remains of the old anti-war movement try to push back.

But that effort has a fatal weakness at its core. It concedes to Trump and opponents of the Iran deal an effective argument: that the Iranians have been lying when they say they've never had a covert nuclear weapons program. The theme of Iran's duplicity has been the emotional core of the assault on the JCPOA. It is no accident that the title and consistent theme of **Benjamin Netanyahu's** [melodramatic YouTube slideshow](#) was "Iran lied."

As I detail in my [investigative history of the Iran nuclear issue](#), the Obama administration itself fell for a false narrative about a secret Iranian nuclear weapons program allegedly in operation from 2001 to 2003. After Netanyahu's April 30 show, former secretary of state **John Kerry** tweeted:

"Every detail PM Netanyahu presented yesterday was every reason the world came together to apply years of sanctions and negotiate the Iran nuclear agreement—because the threat was real and had to be stopped."

But a far more effective counter would have been the truth—that the long-accepted accusation about Iran's covert nuclear weapons program is the product of an elaborate disinformation operation based on documents forged by Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency.

In mid-2004, the CIA acquired a massive set of documents that were said to have come from a secret Iranian nuclear weapons research program. Bush administration officials leaked a sensational story to selected news outlets about the intelligence find, describing to the [New York Times](#) what that newspaper described as Iranian drawings "trying to develop a compact warhead to fit atop its Shahab missile." The same story of Iran mating a nuclear weapon to its longer-range ballistic missile was given to the [Washington Post](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#).

But both the real provenance of the apparently incriminating documents and specific details about the documents themselves indicate that they are fraudulent. A major clue about the papers' true origins was made public in November 2004, when **Karsten Voigt**, the coordinator for German-North American cooperation in the German Foreign Office, was [quoted by the Wall Street Journal](#) warning that the documents had been provided by "an Iranian dissident group," and that the United States and Europe "shouldn't let their Iran policy be influenced by single-source headlines."

Voigt was clearly suggesting that the mysterious documents had come from the Iranian regime-hating MEK (Mujahideen-e-Khalq)—not from someone in the purported Iranian arms program. But no one in the corporate media universe followed up with Voigt, and it was not until 2013, three years after he'd retired from the Foreign Office, that he agreed to give this writer the story behind his warning.

Voigt recalled how senior officials of the Bundesnachrichtendienst, or BND, the German foreign intelligence agency, had told him just days before the *Wall Street Journal* interview that they were upset **Secretary of State Colin Powell** had referred publicly to "evidence" that Iran had tried to design a new missile to carry a nuclear weapon. Voigt explained that the documents to which Powell was alluding had been turned over to the BND by an Iranian who had been a sometime source—but not a BND spy, contrary to later accounts in [the Wall Street Journal](#) and [Der Spiegel](#).

In fact, he said, the BND did not regard the source as trustworthy, because they knew he was a member of the MEK, the exiled armed Iranian opposition group. The MEK is listed by the State Department as a terrorist organization because of its assassination of U.S. officers during the Shah's regime and its bombings of public events after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The MEK also carried out "special operations" for **Saddam Hussein's** regime in Iraq against domestic opposition during the Iran-Iraq war, and after that had been used by Israel's Mossad to "launder" information that it wanted to make public but didn't want attributed to Israel, [according to two Israeli journalists](#). The MEK had pinpointed the location of Iran's Natanz enrichment facility in August 2002. But it had gotten the satellite intelligence from Mossad, as Seymour Hersh reported in his 2005 book [Chain of Command](#).

Two years before Voigt's conversation with BND officials, then-BND director **August Hanning** [personally warned CIA director George Tenet](#) to be cautious about using the testimony of the infamous Iraq "Curveball" source regarding Iraqi bioweapons because it could not be independently confirmed. Other BND analysts said that "Curveball" was unreliable. Powell had nevertheless used the information in his infamous United Nations speech justifying the coming invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Two years later, BND officials were afraid history was about to be repeated in Iran. Germany had just joined France and Britain in reaching an accord with Tehran, which was aimed at averting a U.S. move to take the Iran file out of the IAEA and create a new crisis at the UN Security Council over the issue of the nuclear program.

But it wasn't just the provenance of the MEK documents that was suspect. Their authenticity was never clearly established by the CIA, which could not rule out the possibility of falsification, [according to the Washington Post](#). **Mohamed ElBaradei**, then director-general of the IAEA, was put under heavy political pressure by a U.S.-led coalition to publish a report endorsing those documents as evidence against Iran. But Elbaradei responded to the

pressure by declaring in an October 2009 interview,

“The IAEA is not making any judgment at all whether Iran even had weaponization studies before because there is a major question of authenticity of the documents.”

Benjamin Netanyahu gave the public its first view of the documents on which the Bush administration had heavily relied to sway ElBaradei, showing in his slideshow a surprisingly crude schematic drawing of a Shahab-3 missile reentry vehicle with a circle representing a nuclear weapon. What is important to note about that image is that the shape of the reentry vehicle is the “dunce cap” shape of the original missile that Iran had acquired from North Korea in the mid-1990s. As early as 2000, the CIA’s national intelligence officer on Iranian missiles testified that Iran had already begun redesigning the Shahab-3 missile for better performance. But the outside world was in the dark about what the redesign would look like until the new missile was given its first test flight in August 2004. That test revealed that the redesigned reentry vehicle had a “tri-conic” or “baby bottle” shape.

However, the 36-page document of which the image shown by Netanyahu was a part, called “Implementation of Mass Properties of Shahab-3 Missile Warhead with New Payload,” was dated March-April 2003—long after the redesign of the reentry vehicle had taken place—as the [IAEA’s May 2008 report](#) shows on page two of its annex. The inescapable conclusion is that the authors of those drawings were not working for a project of the Iranian Defense Ministry but for a foreign intelligence agency, which guessed wrongly that the shape of Iran’s missile would not change fundamentally.

Lastly,* we have “Project 5,” another alleged project listed in the Iranian weapons program documents, supposedly involving uranium ore mining and conversion of uranium ore for enrichment. One of the sub-projects, designated “Project 5.15”, was for “ore concentration.” But when the IAEA accessed the [original documents from Iran](#) in response to its questions, it found that the contract for a “Project 5.15” for ore concentration had been signed not by a secret nuclear weapons project but by the *civilian* Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, which was in fact responsible for all activities relating to Iranian uranium ore mines. Furthermore, the IAEA found that the project document had been signed in August 1999—two years before the start date of the alleged secret nuclear weapons research project. When this writer confronted former IAEA **Deputy Director Olli Heinonen** about the contradiction, he admitted that he could not explain it.

The Israeli role in the creation of evidence of Iran’s nuclear weapons ambitions didn’t end with the papers delivered by the MEK. In 2008-09, Israel turned over more alleged Iranian documents to the IAEA, including a report on experiments with “multi-point initiation” of a nuclear explosion, which Netanyahu emphasized in his recent YouTube presentation. The IAEA and the U.S.-led coalition of states that dominated it of course refused to identify the member state that had provided those documents, but ElBaradei [revealed](#) in his memoirs that the state was indeed Israel.

The historical impact of the Israelis getting U.S. national security, political, and media elites to accept that these fabrications represented genuine evidence of Iran’s nuclear duplicity can hardly be understated. It has unquestionably been one of history’s most successful—and longest running—disinformation campaigns. But it worked without a hitch, because of the readiness of those elites to believe without question anything that was

consistent with their perceived interests in continued enmity toward Iran.

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**Note 5/14: The story was republished with additional information by the author.*

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