

U.S. Intelligence Found Iran Nuke Document Was Forged

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WASHINGTON, 28 Dec (IPS) – U.S. intelligence has concluded that the document published recently by the Times of London, which purportedly describes an Iranian plan to do experiments on what the newspaper described as a “neutron initiator” for an atomic weapon, is a fabrication, according to a former Central Intelligence Agency official.

Philip Giraldi, who was a CIA counterterrorism official from 1976 to 1992, told IPS that intelligence sources say that the United States had nothing to do with forging the document, and that Israel is the primary suspect. The sources do not rule out a British role in the fabrication, however.

The Times of London story published Dec. 14 did not identify the source of the document. But it quoted “an Asian intelligence source” – a term some news media have used for Israeli intelligence officials – as confirming that his government believes Iran was working on a neutron initiator as recently as 2007.

The story of the purported Iranian document prompted a new round of expressions of U.S. and European support for tougher sanctions against Iran and reminders of Israel’s threats to attack Iranian nuclear programme targets if diplomacy fails.

U.S. news media reporting has left the impression that U.S. intelligence analysts have not made up their mind about the document’s authenticity, although it has been widely reported that they have now had a full year to assess the issue.

Giraldi’s intelligence sources did not reveal all the reasons that led analysts to conclude that the purported Iran document had been fabricated by a foreign intelligence agency. But their suspicions of fraud were prompted in part by the source of the story, according to Giraldi.

“The Rupert Murdoch chain has been used extensively to publish false intelligence from the Israelis and occasionally from the British government,” Giraldi said.

The Times is part of a Murdoch publishing empire that includes the Sunday Times, Fox News and the New York Post. All Murdoch-owned news media report on Iran with an aggressively pro-Israeli slant.

The document itself also had a number of red flags suggesting possible or likely fraud.

The subject of the two-page document which the Times published in English translation would be highly classified under any state’s security system. Yet there is no confidentiality marking on the document, as can be seen from the photograph of the Farsi-language

original published by the Times.

The absence of security markings has been cited by the Iranian ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, as evidence that the “alleged studies” documents, which were supposedly purloined from an alleged Iranian nuclear weapons-related programme early in this decade, are forgeries.

The document also lacks any information identifying either the issuing office or the intended recipients. The document refers cryptically to “the Centre”, “the Institute”, “the Committee”, and the “neutron group”.

The document’s extreme vagueness about the institutions does not appear to match the concreteness of the plans, which call for hiring eight individuals for different tasks for very specific numbers of hours for a four-year time frame.

Including security markings and such identifying information in a document increases the likelihood of errors that would give the fraud away.

The absence of any date on the document also conflicts with the specificity of much of the information. The Times reported that unidentified “foreign intelligence agencies” had dated the document to early 2007, but gave no reason for that judgment.

An obvious motive for suggesting the early 2007 date is that it would discredit the U.S. intelligence community’s November 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran had discontinued unidentified work on nuclear weapons and had not resumed it as of the time of the estimate.

Discrediting the NIE has been a major objective of the Israeli government for the past two years, and the British and French governments have supported the Israeli effort.

The biggest reason for suspecting that the document is a fraud is its obvious effort to suggest past Iranian experiments related to a neutron initiator. After proposing experiments on detecting pulsed neutrons, the document refers to “locations where such experiments used to be conducted”.

That reference plays to the widespread assumption, which has been embraced by the International Atomic Energy Agency, that Iran had carried out experiments with Polonium-210 in the late 1980s, indicating an interest in neutron initiators. The IAEA referred in reports from 2004 through 2007 to its belief that the experiment with Polonium-210 had potential relevance to making “a neutron initiator in some designs of nuclear weapons”.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political arm of the terrorist organisation Mujahedeen-e Khalq, claimed in February 2005 that Iran’s research with Polonium-210 was continuing and that it was now close to producing a neutron initiator for a nuclear weapon.

Sanger and Broad were so convinced that the Polonium-210 experiments proved Iran’s interest in a neutron initiator that they referred in their story on the leaked document to both the IAEA reports on the experiments in the late 1980s and the claim by NCRI of continuing Iranian work on such a nuclear trigger.

What Sanger and Broad failed to report, however, is that the IAEA has acknowledged that it was mistaken in its earlier assessment that the Polonium-210 experiments were related to a neutron initiator.

After seeing the complete documentation on the original project, including complete copies of the reactor logbook for the entire period, the IAEA concluded in its Feb. 22, 2008 report that Iran's explanations that the Polonium-210 project was fundamental research with the eventual aim of possible application to radio isotope batteries was "consistent with the Agency's findings and with other information available to it".

The IAEA report said the issue of Polonium-210 – and thus the earlier suspicion of an Iranian interest in using it as a neutron initiator for a nuclear weapon – was now considered "no longer outstanding".

New York Times reporters David Sanger and William J. Broad reported U.S. intelligence officials as saying the intelligence analysts "have yet to authenticate the document". Sanger and Broad explained the failure to do so, however, as a result of excessive caution left over from the CIA's having failed to brand as a fabrication the document purporting to show an Iraqi effort to buy uranium in Niger.

The Washington Post's Joby Warrick dismissed the possibility that the document might be found to be fraudulent. "There is no way to establish the authenticity or original source of the document..." wrote Warrick.

But the line that the intelligence community had authenticated it evidently reflected the Barack Obama administration's desire to avoid undercutting a story that supports its efforts to get Russian and Chinese support for tougher sanctions against Iran.

This is not the first time that Giraldi has been tipped off by his intelligence sources on forged documents. Giraldi identified the individual or office responsible for creating the two most notorious forged documents in recent U.S. intelligence history.

In 2005, Giraldi identified Michael Ledeen, the extreme right-wing former consultant to the National Security Council and the Pentagon, as an author of the fabricated letter purporting to show Iraqi interest in purchasing uranium from Niger. That letter was used by the George W. Bush administration to bolster its false case that Saddam Hussein had an active nuclear weapons programme.

Giraldi also identified officials in the "Office of Special Plans" who worked under Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith as having forged a letter purportedly written by Hussein's intelligence director, Tahir Jalail Habbush al-Tikriti, to Hussein himself referring to an Iraqi intelligence operation to arrange for an unidentified shipment from Niger.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, "Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam", was published in 2006.

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