

US Uses Fake Intelligence as Evidence of Iranian Covert Nuclear Weapons Program

Obama Pins Fate of Nuclear Pact on Documents From an Iranian "Curveball"

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President Barack Obama leaves his podium after addressing the nation on an agreement reached with Iran that would temporarily freeze Tehran's nuclear program and lay the foundation for a more sweeping accord, at the White House in Washington, November 23, 2013. (Photo: Doug Mills / The New York Times)

Obama administration officials insist "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear program must be resolved to the satisfaction of the IAEA to complete a nuclear agreement. But the term refers to discredited intelligence from suspect sources.

One of the issues Obama administration officials are insisting must be resolved to the satisfaction of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) before any nuclear agreement may be concluded involves "possible military dimensions." That term refers to documents long discredited by German intelligence but which the United States and the IAEA have maintained came from a covert Iranian nuclear weapons program.

A former senior German official has now revealed that the biggest collection of documents cited as evidence of such a covert Iran program actually came from a member of the Iranian terrorist organization Mujihedin-E-Khalq (MEK) and that German intelligence sought to warn the George W. Bush administration that the source of the documents was not trustworthy.

The use of those documents to make a case for action against Iran closely parallels the Bush administration's use of the testimony of the now-discredited Iraqi exile called "Curveball" to convince the US public to support war against Iraq. The parallel between the two episodes was recognized explicitly by the German intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), according to Karsten Voigt, who was the German Foreign Office's coordinator of North American-German relations.

Voigt provided details of the story behind the appearance of the mysterious Iran nuclear documents in an interview with this writer last March for a book on the false narrative surrounding Iran's nuclear program that is newly published, [Manufactured Crisis](#).

Voigt recalled that the purported Iranian documents were acquired by BND in 2004 from a member of the Iranian anti-regime terrorist organization MEK and that the BND was concerned that the Bush administration was about to use intelligence from that dubious source to make a case for war only two years after it had relied on testimony of the notorious "Curveball" to make the case for war in Iraq.

The BND officials were concerned that Bush administration appeared to be making the case that Iran was working on nuclear weapons on the basis of the information that was now in question, according to Voigt.

Voigt told me he learned about the Iranian nuclear documents after remarks to reporters by Secretary of State Colin Powell in mid-November 2004 had caused consternation among senior officials of the BND. Powell had referred to “information” that Iran was “working hard” at combining a missile with a “weapon,” clearly implying that it was a nuclear weapon. Voigt said senior BND officials contacted him immediately after the story of Powell’s remarks had been reported by news media.

The BND officials told Voigt that they were familiar with the “information” to which Powell had referred, which they described as a set of drawings of different ways to redesign the reentry vehicle of the Iranian Shahab-3 missile. They told Voigt that the drawings were part of a large collection of papers that had been turned over to the BND by an Iranian who had been an occasional intelligence source for the agency, though not an actual BND intelligence agent. But the BND officials explained to Voigt that the source was not someone inside the Iranian defense establishment, as Bush administration officials would leak to selected journalists, but a member of the MEK. The officials made it clear to Voigt that they did not have confidence in the source. “They believed the source was doubtful,” Voigt recalled.

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The BND officials were alarmed by Powell’s comment on the information from the documents, because they still had vivid memories of the “Curveball” episode involving a German intelligence informant two years earlier. “We had such a situation in the Iraq war,” recalled Voigt.

In a series of interviews with BND officers beginning in 2000, “Curveball” had provided a series of vivid accounts of mobile biological weapons laboratories developed by Saddam Hussein’s government. The BND had passed on reports of those accounts to the CIA, apparently without assessment of the source, as the usual practice by intelligence services sharing information with counterparts in other nations’ services.

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As BND officials continued to interrogate Curveball, however, they had begun to find inconsistencies in his account and to doubt the story. By the time CIA Director George Tenet asked the BND directly, in December 2002, whether the White House could use Curveball’s information for public statements, the BND officials had lost confidence in the source and were convinced that the Bush administration was planning to cite the Iraqi defector’s claims to justify war in Iraq, according to the account in investigative journalist Bob Drogin’s book *Curveball*.

August Hanning, the head of BND then wrote a two-page letter to Tenet that warned, "Please be cautious about using this source," Hanning recalled, in an interview for a BBC documentary. Nevertheless, only a few weeks later, Colin Powell had gone ahead to cite Curveball's testimony as the centerpiece of his February 2003 UN Security Council speech making the case for war against Iraq.

The same senior BND officials who had been involved in the Curveball issue – including Hanning himself – were still at the agency in November 2004. Now they were afraid of the same drama being replayed, with the Bush administration using information from an Iranian "Curveball" to make a case for a military confrontation with Iran. And Powell was again playing the role of presenting the case to the public.

Voigt said that the senior BND officials did not tell him explicitly that they wanted him to warn the United States against relying on the documents from their source. Nevertheless, he was convinced that they expected him to do so. "They tell you, 'this is confidential,' " said Voigt, "but you get the story."

Voigt was no ordinary German civil servant. He had been a Social Democratic Party (SPD) member of parliament for more than two decades and was the party spokesman on foreign policy in the Bundestag before assuming his job as the coordinator for relations with the United States at the Foreign Office in 1998. He was named to the position by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of the SPD, who opposed the Bush administration's war in Iraq and was worried about a potential war against Iran. And he was known to maintain many contacts with American officials, think tanks and news media.

He did not wait long to get the message of warning about the purported Iranian nuclear documents to the United States. On November 22, 2004, a few days after his conversation with the BND officials, the Wall Street Journal reported Voigt as saying that the information mentioned by Powell on Iran's work on a nuclear weapon had been provided by "an Iranian dissident group" and said the United States and Europe "shouldn't let their Iran policy be influenced by single-source headlines."

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Senior CIA officials who knew about the documents could hardly have missed the message. And if they had not already learned about the BND's conclusions about the doubtful MEK source in November 2004 directly from Hanning himself, they could have easily gotten an explanation of the Voigt warning simply by having the CIA station chief in Berlin ask his BND contacts about the issue.

But the new director, Porter Goss, and other senior CIA officials were evidently not interested in sharing the information about the MEK member as the source of the documents or BND's doubts about his reliability with Powell. Powell told his former chief of staff Lawrence Wilkerson that he had been told nothing about that, Wilkerson said, in response to a query from this writer. Powell had been similarly fed information from "Curveball" in 2003 to be used in his United Nations speech on WMD in Iraq that Tenet knew from BND director Hanning had been discredited by German intelligence.

Keeping Powell in the dark was necessary to the Iran strategy the neoconservatives were quietly pursuing in 2004. The MEK had been on the US list of terrorist organizations since

1997, because it had killed six US military advisers and civilians in Iran in the 1970s and carried out terror bombings of Iranian government civilian gatherings in the early 1980s. It had been based in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's patronage since the early 1980s. In 2004, Powell and his State Department team still regarded the MEK as a disreputable terrorist organization, but the neoconservatives in the administration viewed it as useful as an anti-regime tool.

The MEK was known to have served the interests of Israel's Mossad by providing a way to "launder" intelligence claims that Israel wanted to get out to the public but didn't want identified as having come from Israel. In the best-known case, the group's political front organization, the National Council of Resistance in Iran, had revealed the location of the Iranian uranium enrichment facility at Natanz in an August 2002 press conference, but it had been given the coordinates of the construction site by Israeli intelligence, according to both a senior IAEA official and an Iranian opposition group source, cited by Seymour Hersh and *New Yorker* writer Connie Bruck, respectively.

The purported Iranian documents conveyed by the MEK to Western intelligence also displayed multiple indications of having been fabricated by an outside actor. The clearest and most significant anomaly was that the drawings of efforts to redesign the Shahab-3 missile to accommodate a nuclear weapons showed a missile that had already been abandoned by Iran's Defense Ministry by the time the drawings were said to have been made, as was confirmed by former IAEA deputy director general for safeguards, Olli Heinonen, in an interview with this writer.

The Iranian abandonment of the earlier missile design became known to foreign analysts, however, only after Iran flight-tested a completely new missile design in August 2004 – after the "laptop documents" had already been conveyed to the BND by its MEK source. Whoever ordered those drawings was unaware of the switch to the new missile design, which would rule out a genuine Iranian Defense Ministry or military program.

A former IAEA official familiar with those documents recalled in interview with Truthout that senior officials at the IAEA were immediately suspicious of the entire collection of documents given to the agency in 2005. "The documents were never really convincing," said the former official. The creators of the documents had taken publicly available information about people, organizations and location and had "woven their own narrative" around them, he said. Furthermore, he recalled finding anomalies in the stamps and signature blocs of documents.

The fabricated documents, depicting Iran as redesigning their missile reentry vehicle to accommodate a nuclear weapon, among other things, fit into a Bush administration strategy – coordinated with Israel – that was aimed at justifying a military confrontation with Iran. The working assumption, as was revealed by David Wurmser, special assistant to Bolton and then to Cheney, in October 2007, was that the United States would probably need to use force to bring about that change once Iraq was brought under control. Bolton recalls in his memoirs that his aim was to move the Iran nuclear issue out of the IAEA to the United Nations Security Council, where the Bush administration would call for international action against Iran, and failing that, take unilateral action.

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The threat of force was set aside in favor of an economic sanctions strategy after Condoleezza Rice become secretary of state in 2005, but the documents continued to be at the center of the strategy. In 2005, the Bush administration turned the entire collection of documents over to the IAEA and pressed the agency to demand explanations from Iran – but without sharing any of the documents with Iranian officials. Iran denounced the documents as fabrications from the beginning, but in 2008, the IAEA Safeguards Department abandoned any pretense of a neutral role on the issue and began to refer to them as “credible.” US diplomatic cables from early 2008 made public by WikiLeaks reveal that the head of the Safeguards Department, Olli Heinonen, was working closely with US officials to develop a common political strategy to isolate Iran over the purported Iranian documents.

The IAEA got more documents and intelligence directly from Israel in 2008 and 2009 claiming Iranian work on nuclear weapons, according to then-IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei. The intelligence passed on by Israel included the claim that Iran had installed a large metal cylinder for high explosives tests at its Parchin military facility in 2000, which it intended to use for hydrodynamic tests of nuclear weapons designs. But the IAEA never revealed the information had come from Israel, covering up the primary fact relevant to its reliability and authenticity.

The Safeguards Department had been prepared as early as 2009 to publish a dossier on what it called the “possible military dimensions” of the Iranian nuclear program that would accept all the intelligence reports and documents provided by Israel as genuine and accurate. But ElBaradei’s successor, Yukiya Amano, waited to do so until November 2011, when the Obama administration was ready to organize an international coalition for harsh sanctions against Iran’s oil export sector.

The Obama administration returned to the “possible military dimensions” last November, insisting on a provision in the interim Iran nuclear agreement that required Iran to “resolve” all the “concerns” about that issue. A “senior administration official” briefing the press on the agreement November 24 said there would be no final agreement unless Iran showed that it had “come into compliance with its obligations under the NPT and its obligations to the IAEA.”

It is unclear how Obama expects Iran to do that. In another background briefing February 17, an unnamed senior official suggested that Iran would have to satisfy the IAEA, but Amano has no incentive to admit that the claims about Iran that it has published are false.

In response to a request from Truthout for a confirmation or denial of the revelation by Karsten Voigt of the MEK role in transmitting the purported Iranian documents to the BND in 2004, NSC officials declined to comment on the matter, according to NSC spokesperson Bernadette Meehan.

Some observers believe US negotiators hope to get Iran to admit to having had a nuclear weapons program. However, Iran is certainly not going to admit that the documents and intelligence reports it knows to be fabrications are true. But the Obama administration may well believe so strongly in the Iran nuclear narrative it inherited from the Bush administration and in the idea that the sanctions against Iran confer ultimate negotiating

leverage on the United States that it sees an Iranian confession as a realistic goal. In any case, the decision to introduce the falsified evidence of the past into the final negotiations is bound to bring them to an impasse unless the United States is prepared to back down.

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