

Koch: What real experts make of the Iran NIE

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A recent National Intelligence Estimate claims that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. According to President Bush, the NIE claim is based, on "a great discovery by American intelligence agencies." However, the President would not elaborate.

Current and former American and foreign officials say the new findings are based on intercepted communications and accounts provided by individuals with access to information about Iran's nuclear program.

Has Iran really dropped its nuclear weapons program? We would do well to recall the CIA's recent track record.

The CIA was wrong when it advised President Bush that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, referring to chemical and biological weaponry, and that Iraq was developing a nuclear capability that would be available in a short period of time.

How did the Iraq fiasco begin?

There is no question that in the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran, 1980-88, Iraq used poison gas that killed and maimed tens of thousands of Iranian soldiers.

Iraq also used poison gas against its own Kurdish population. Therefore, after the war that started in 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened to invade Saudi Arabia, the United Nations demanded Iraq account for its weapons of mass destruction.

And yet after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, we found no such weapons. As we all now know, the CIA and everyone else was wrong. Saddam even fooled his own generals. But Saddam had been bluffing. He bluffed himself right out of existence. He was subsequently hanged for crimes against his own people.

Does this mean we should have ignored the CIA reports?

In my opinion, no U.S. President should ever ignore a CIA or NIE report describing dangers and threats to America's survival. Such reports must be assumed to be correct and measures must be taken to neutralize threats to our national security. CIA and NIE reports that do not project threats to our survival can be debated to a far greater degree, since time is not of the essence.

There is now an ongoing debate in the capitals of the world. Are earlier conclusions of the U.S. security agencies wrong, and the current National Intelligence Estimate report correct in evaluating the activities of Iran in seeking weapons of mass destruction? Was Tehran, like Saddam, only bluffing about its nuclear weapons program?

This is a complicated issue, and one that most Americans are not equipped to determine themselves - I certainly am not. We should look elsewhere for guidance. Four experts whom I trust have come to a different conclusion than the latest NIE report. Former Secretary of State George Shultz; former CIA Director James Woolsey; Senator John Kyl (R-AZ) and Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT) issued their own response to the NIE report in their capacity as leaders of the Committee on the Present Danger - Fighting Terrorism and The Ideologies that Drive It."

Their conclusions are summed up in their joint statement of December 6th: "Failure of Logic. Did Iran drop its nuclear weapons program? To believe so, you must set aside lots of other evidence that the Islamic Republic is hell-bent on developing or acquiring such weaponry, including its boasting about future superpower status and new capabilities; its messianic rhetoric; its stated designs on Israel, the United States, and the West in general; its simultaneous development of long-range missiles; its research into equipping such missiles with nuclear warheads; its two decades (and counting) of deception about nuclear research to begin with; and the desires of at least ten of Iran's less complacent neighbors to start their own nuclear programs. Failure of intelligence. The United States currently lacks anything resembling a serious human intelligence capability vis-à-vis Iran, with such basic elements as 'eyes on the ground.' That raises the question of how, exactly, the NIE's authors have any 'confidence' at all in their estimates. Couple that with reports that the

earthshaking new information that prompted the intelligence U-turn came from disclosures by Iranian military commanders and defectors, and there is ample reason to greet the new revelations with a healthy dose of skepticism."

The conclusions of these four American experts are, in effect, endorsed by the statements of the President of France Nicolas Sarkozy and Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, as reported by The Times of December 7th: "The leaders of France and Germany said Thursday that Iran remained a danger and that other nations needed to keep up the pressure over its nuclear program despite a United States intelligence report's conclusion that Tehran was no longer building a bomb.

"Speaking at a joint news conference at the Élysée Palace, President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel said they had not changed their minds despite the findings of the American intelligence estimate released Monday, which some believed would have eroded support for tougher new sanctions."

Finally, on the subject of the danger of Iran to the United States and others, we have the statement of Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, himself a former director of the CIA, as reported in The Times on December 9th: "Since that government now acknowledges the quality of American intelligence assessments," Mr. Gates said, "I assume that it will also embrace as valid American intelligence assessments of its funding and training of militia groups in Iraq, its deployment of lethal weapons and technology to both Iraq and Afghanistan, its ongoing support of terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas that have murdered thousands of innocent civilians and its continued research and development of medium-range ballistic missiles that are not particularly cost-effective unless equipped with warheads carrying weapons of mass destruction."

Putting it all together, I believe that Iran is still a great danger to us and others. The President of Iran has threatened not only our ally, Israel, but the U.S. itself, saying, as reported by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), located in Washington: "They [ask]: 'Is it possible for us to witness a world without America and Zionism?' But you had best know that this slogan and this goal are attainable, and surely can be achieved."

We live in a dangerous world. The survival of the U.S. must be our paramount concern. If Iran could, it would terrorize us here at home and destroy us. We must never let down our guard in seeking to protect our country from our enemies. Take our enemies at their word. Of course, the U.S. has made errors in judgment. Every human being and every country does, but that should not cause us to withdraw from world affairs or to stop insisting that Iran cease threatening U.S. personnel in Iraq, the U.S. homeland, as well as our allies in the Middle East. Senator John McCain said it better than anyone else to date: "There's only one thing worse than the United States exercising the military option, that is, a nuclear-armed Iran."

By Ed Koch, Sunday December 16, 2007

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