

Stupid intelligence

ALAN M. DERSHOWITZ

18 December 2007

The Jerusalem Post

The recent national intelligence estimate that concluded that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 is just about the stupidest intelligence assessment I have ever read. It falls hook, line and sinker for a transparent bait and switch tactic employed not only by Iran, but by several other nuclear powers in the past.

The tactic is obvious and well-known to all intelligence officials with an IQ above room temperature. It goes like this: There are two tracks to making nuclear weapons: One is to conduct research and develop technology directly related to military use. That is what the United States did when it developed the atomic bomb during the Manhattan Project. The second track is to develop nuclear technology for civilian use and then to use the civilian technology for military purposes.

What every intelligence agency knows is that the most difficult part of developing weapons corresponds precisely to the second track, namely civilian use. In other words, it is relatively simple to move from track 2 to track 1 in a short period of time. As Valerie Lincy and Gary Milhollin, both experts on nuclear arms control, put it in a New York Times Op-Ed on December 6, 2007: "During the past year, a period when Iran's weapons program was supposedly halted, the government has been busy installing some 3,000 gas centrifuges at its plant at Natanz. These machines could, if operated continuously for about a year, create enough enriched uranium to provide fuel for a bomb. In addition, they have no plausible purpose in Iran's civilian nuclear effort. All of Iran's needs for enriched uranium for its energy programs are covered by a contract with Russia.

"Iran is also building a heavy water reactor at its research center at Arak. This reactor is ideal for producing plutonium for nuclear bombs, but is of little use in an energy program like Iran's, which does not use plutonium for reactor fuel. India, Israel and Pakistan have all built similar reactors - all with the purpose of fueling nuclear weapons. And why, by the way, does Iran even want a nuclear energy program, when it is sitting on an enormous pool of oil that is now skyrocketing in value? And why is Iran developing long-range Shihab missiles, which make no military sense without nuclear warheads to put on them?

"... the halting of its secret enrichment and weapon design efforts in 2003 proves only that Iran made a tactical move. It suspended work that, if discovered, would unambiguously reveal intent to build a weapon. It has continued other work, crucial to the ability to make a bomb, that it can pass off as having civilian applications."

DUH! WHAT then can explain so obvious an intelligence gaffe. One explanation could lie in the old saw that "military intelligence is to intelligence as military music is to music." But I simply don't believe that our intelligence agencies are populated by the kind of nincompoops who would fall for so obvious an Iranian ploy. The more likely explanation is that there is an agenda hiding in the report. What then might that agenda be?

To find a hidden agenda one should always look for the beneficiaries. Who wins from this deeply flawed report? Well, certainly Iran does, but it is unlikely that Iranian interests could drive any American agenda. Lincy and Milhollin surmise that: "We should be suspicious of any document that suddenly gives the Bush administration a pass on a big national security problem it won't solve during its remaining year in office. Is the administration just washing its hands of the intractable Iranian nuclear issue by saying, '[i]f we can't fix it, it ain't broke?'"

My own view is that the authors of the report were fighting the last war. No, not the war in Iraq, but rather what they believe was Vice President Dick Cheney's efforts to go to war with Iran. This report surely takes the wind out of those sails. But that was last year's unfought war. Nobody in Washington has seriously considered attacking Iran since Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates replaced Cheney as the foreign policy power behind the throne.

Whatever the agenda and whatever the motive this report may well go down in history as one of the most dangerous, misguided and counterproductive intelligence assessments in history. It may well encourage the Iranians to move even more quickly in developing nuclear weapons. If the report is correct in arguing that the only way of discouraging Iran from developing nuclear weapons is to maintain international pressure, then the authors of the report must surely know

that they have singlehandedly reduced any incentive by the international community to keep the pressure up.

If Neville Chamberlain weren't long dead I would wonder whether he had a hand in writing this "peace in our time" intelligence fiasco.

I wish the intelligence assessment were correct. So does most of the media, which accepted its naive conclusion with uncritical enthusiasm. The world would be a far safer place if Iran had indeed ended its efforts to develop deliverable nuclear weapons. But wishing for a desirable outcome does not make it so. Pretending that a desirable outcome is happening, when the best information indicates that it's not, only encourages the worst outcome.

The authors of this perverse report, which is influencing policy so immediately and negatively, will have much to answer for if their assessment results in a reduction of pressure on Iran - which is the only nation actually to threaten to use nuclear weapons to attack its enemies - to stop its obvious march toward becoming the world's most dangerous nuclear military power.

The writer is a professor of law at Harvard. This article first appeared on Alan Dershowitz's blog "Double Standard Watch" on Jpost.com's BlogCentral

Presented with permission of author.