

New York Times recycles fabrications about Iran's nuclear programs

By Peter Symonds
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The media campaign of half-truths and fabrications over Iran's nuclear programs stepped up a notch over the weekend. A prominent front-page article in Sunday's *New York Times* breathlessly revealed "a confidential analysis" by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors who "concluded" that Tehran had sufficient information to build a workable atomic bomb.

While even the *New York Times* conceded that the conclusions were "tentative and subject to further confirmation", the article conveniently provided the opportunity for Obama administration officials to do the rounds of the Sunday television talk-shows to argue for intensifying pressure on Iran and for right-wing commentators and lawmakers to demand more aggressive action.

All of this has a familiar ring. The *New York Times* played a very similar role in the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Articles in the Sunday edition of the American newspaper of record, many of which were clearly planted by the Bush administration itself, provided a platform for top US officials to manufacture an atmosphere of fear over Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda.

Like the Iraqi regime, Iran confronts an impossible task in proving that nowhere in its large territory are there facilities for making, in this case, a nuclear bomb. Tehran's declaration on September 21 of an incomplete uranium enrichment plant near the city of Qom was seized on four days later by Obama to ratchet up the pressure on Iran. An agreement reached with IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei for inspections of the site on October 25 has brought immediate criticisms that this would allow Iran to shift sensitive equipment elsewhere. While Washington is not yet demanding searches of the equivalent of Saddam Hussein's palaces, the push for more intrusive inspections has begun.

The *New York Times* article is part of this campaign.

The newspaper has deliberately inflated a "confidential analysis" that is at least six months old, is incomplete and the subject of sharp controversy within the IAEA itself. Washington's European allies—Britain, France and Germany—have, in recent weeks, been demanding the release of this "secret annexe" as part of their efforts to bully Iran. In part, the effort is aimed at overturning the National Intelligence Estimate reached in 2007 by US spy agencies that Iran had ended its alleged nuclear weapons programs in 2003—a conclusion disputed by European intelligence organisations.

It is significant that the European powers have taken the lead and that the IAEA is the focus of their campaign. The simple truth is that any attempt to concoct dossiers along the lines produced by the US and British prior to the invasion of Iraq would simply not be believed by the vast majority of people. Rather than discredited American intelligence agencies pushing the case, their European counterparts have taken over.

To date, only limited segments of the IAEA document have been leaked to the press. The most extensive are to be found on the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) website, which cites one version of a 67-page report entitled "Possible Military Dimensions of Iran's Nuclear Program". The *New York Times* chose to highlight the assessment that "Iran has sufficient information to be able to design and produce a workable implosion nuclear device" based on highly enriched uranium.

The claim is based on highly dubious sources. As the ISIS noted: "Much of the IAEA's information, including test data, reports, diagrams, and videos, was reportedly contained on a laptop. This laptop has received considerable attention since its public revelation in 2005." The think tank then noted that the purported laptop, which has never been handed over to the IAEA, might not even exist, but might simply have been invented by US

intelligence as a cover for a source inside Iran. The ISIS, which had previously been critical of the data, now concludes, without serious explanation, that the information “appears authentic”.

Since its revelation by US intelligence in 2005, the “laptop” has become notorious. In his book *Target Iran*, former US military intelligence officer and UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter described the laptop “as a product of joint cooperation between the Israeli intelligence service and their German counterparts.” He drew attention to the distinct possibility that the data had been fabricated by Israeli intelligence by weaving together outright lies with a few verifiable facts. Now, as the US confrontation with Iran again escalates, the “laptop” story is being reenergised by unspecified information from Western intelligence agencies and recycled as good coin.

Buried towards the end of the *New York Times* article is a scant reference to an interview by IAEA director ElBaradei with the *Hindu* newspaper on Saturday. It is worth quoting his comments at length. Asked about Washington’s “laptop”, he said: “Information about the alleged [military] studies came over time to the agency. Iran says this information is fake. US intelligence says Iran had weaponisation studies that stopped in 2003, other [Western agencies] claim Iran continued after that... The IAEA is not making any judgment at all whether Iran even had weaponisation studies before because there is a major question of authenticity of the documents.”

Under the pressure of the US and its European allies, who scarcely conceal their contempt for ElBaradei, the IAEA is again being turned into a political battleground. Asked about the danger of US or Israeli military attacks on Iran, ElBaradei said: [U]sing the language of force is not helpful. It leads to confrontation, to the other country taking counteraction. It is better to forget the language of coercion and focus on trying to engage in dialogue.”

With the “confidential analysis” of the IAEA, or at least one of its factions, in the public arena, Obama officials underscored US demands on Iran. Speaking on NBC’s Sunday show, “Meet the Press”, US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice refused to confirm or deny the report’s conclusion, but nevertheless exploited it to declare: “Our whole approach is predicated on an urgent need to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapons capacity.” Iran, she said, had to “prove to our satisfaction that their program is for peaceful purposes and open up their facilities to inspections, [and] freeze their uranium enrichment program... or face real pressure and consequences.”

Republican and Democrat senators Jon Kyl and Barbara Boxer adopted a more strident tone, both declaring support for legislation to impose draconian new sanctions on the export of refined petroleum products to Iran. By Monday, the *New York Times* was exploiting the debate that it initiated, quoting Republican senator Lindsay Graham on Fox News Sunday citing the IAEA report as proof that Iran was “not developing a nuclear program for peaceful purposes.”

At this stage, the Obama administration has played down the military option, warning instead that Tehran’s failure to meet Washington’s demands by the end of the year would result in crippling sanctions, including a possible ban on the export of petrol and diesel to Iran. Nevertheless, the continuing and open discussion in US political and media circles of the “military option” makes clear that it is on the agenda.

While not emphasising the possibility, Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein, who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee, explained to Fox News Sunday that “you’d have to have a ground operation as well as an [aerial] military operation”, as Iran’s nuclear facilities are buried deep underground.

An article in the *Chicago Tribune* on Saturday, dealt at length with the operational difficulties in conducting air strikes on Iran, but noted that the US military was developing an array of new warheads to hit “hard and deeply buried targets”, including a 30,000 pound “massive ordnance penetrator”. While declaring that it remained “an unthinkable option”, the article did point out that “nuclear warheads could destroy even a deeply buried structure.”

As the *New York Times* article demonstrates, the US and international media are once again a central cog in the campaign to manufacture the pretext for new crimes by the US and its allies. The real motive has nothing to do with Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs, but is to further the ambitions of US imperialism to establish its economic and strategic dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

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