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## **SURPRISE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE?**

# **Iran Report Sends Bush's War Rhetoric Out to Pasture**

*By Gregor Peter Schmitz*

**For months the White House has made warlike noises against Iran over its ambitions to build a nuclear bomb. Now a US intelligence report claims the mullahs' nuclear program has been mothballed since 2003. But how long has Bush known about the findings?**



AFP

Bush still wants to rally governments for tough sanctions "to pressure the Iranian regime to suspend its (nuclear) program."

A loyal national security advisor defends his president -- even when there's not much to defend. Stephen Hadley, George W. Bush's most trusted advisor on security policy, was amazingly self-confident in front of a gathering of international journalists -- although they had all just jotted down some version of a new world headline in their notebooks. The basic idea: a new "National Intelligence Estimate" (NIE) from American spy agencies has flattened Bush's Iran policy.

Still, an unruffled Hadley told the incredulous reporters that the new dossier in fact supported his boss' posture toward Iran. "Today's National Intelligence Estimate offers some positive news," he says. "It confirms that we were right to be worried about Iran seeking to develop nuclear weapons. It tells us that we have made progress in trying to ensure that this does not happen."

And: The risk of an Iranian nuclear bomb, in the White House's view, remained a very serious challenge.

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The trouble for Hadley is that no one else in the world would interpret the 100-page intelligence estimate in quite the same way. The conclusions of the top US analysts who wrote the report -- distilling information gathered by all 16 of America's intelligence agencies -- ring louder than any White House spin. The primary sentences read: "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran

halted its nuclear weapons program." The halt, furthermore, "was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work."

And: "We judge with moderate confidence Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough (highly-enriched uranium) for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame." And finally, in what seems to be an admission of failure by intelligence experts: "We do not know whether (Tehran) currently intends to develop nuclear weapons."

### **To Build a Bomb**

Things sounded quite different in a similar paper two years ago. The judgment of US intelligence agencies in

2005 was that Iran had firmly "decided" to build a bomb.

The sensational shift in tone raises many questions -- for example, the puzzle of how long the White House may have been aware of the findings. Under pressure from reporters Hadley hinted that President Bush had lobbed some of his latest challenges toward Tehran after the new findings had been made.

## TIMELINE



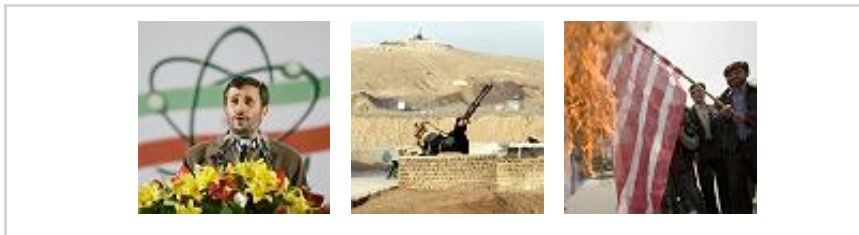
According to sources within US intelligence circles, Bush and his Vice President Dick Cheney were first informed about the new estimate last Wednesday -- November 28 -- although signs of the change in perception must have been obvious for a while, Washington insiders assume. As late as October 17, Bush was still warning about the prospect of "World War III" if Iran developed a nuclear bomb.

And when Angela Merkel **paid a visit** to Bush's ranch in Texas in early November, the president called up the specter of an Iranian nuclear program with hard and drastic words. Stephen Hadley, in a small-scale interview during that visit, appeared to take it for granted that the Iranians were still working on a bomb.

It's hard to imagine a more embarrassing setback for the White House's Iran policy. There are a number of probable consequences. The intelligence estimate will make it harder for the US government to talk the international community into tougher sanctions against Iran -- as the US had actually planned to do at a UN Security Council meeting later in December.

The new findings will also worsen the trench warfare within the US government. A rift has deepened for months between a group of advisors around Vice President Dick Cheney, who has assiduously called for a military attack against Iran, and the US State Department as well as large portions of the military, who consider such a move both dangerous and unwise.

## PHOTO GALLERY: IRAN, THE ASPIRING NUCLEAR POWER



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American spy services seem to have realigned themselves in this battle. "They want to be sure they don't lay the groundwork for yet another war by handing up faulty information," a onetime employee at the White House's National Security Council said in an interview with SPIEGEL ONLINE. "One has to assume that they want to make up for the failures in the run-up to Iraq."

Five years ago, another National Intelligence Estimate -- on the threat to US interests by Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction -- missed its mark by a mile. Independent commissions have criticized that report in the meantime as "chaotic" and a "debacle."

So it makes sense that US intelligence agencies have been working under a new motto: Better to admit a mistake than to contribute one more inadequate justification for a military mission. Spy bosses have broken with recent tradition by releasing their intelligence estimates to the public. The forerunner to this estimate, in 2005 -- the one that assessed Iran as an immediate threat -- had a strong influence on the public debate. This new report was originally due in spring 2007, but the intelligence community wanted more time to do some careful digging.

The intelligence community's about-face will shape the Bush administration's final year. It could also affect the presidential campaign. During the past two months, the foreign policy debates between candidates seeking the presidential nomination from both parties have dealt more with Iran than with American strategy in Iraq.

Even the Democratic Party's leading candidates have been shy of ruling out military options in light of the apparently acute Iranian nuclear threat. Hillary Clinton voted in Senate in favor of a resolution strengthening sanctions against Iran that many understood to be *carte blanche* for military action. After Monday's news, the Senate Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid commented: "This report is directly challenging some of this administration's alarming rhetoric about the threat posed by Iran."

PDF-Download:

[The US National Intelligence Estimate \(summary\)](#)

Still, the surprise National Intelligence Estimate doesn't necessarily spell the end of White House war rhetoric. "Proponents of military action in Iran don't just care about the nuclear program," said the former National Security Council employee. "They are also stressing regime change." There are still some influential neoconservatives who see Bush's final year in office as the last chance for many years to implement those plans.

The report will also make it harder to describe Iran in the future as an irrational "rogue state" which wants to build a nuclear bomb at any price. It could also pave the way for the US to take a more reasonable view of Iran's interests and to reorient American policies in the region.

"If you take a close look, Iran and the US are connected by an extraordinary number of mutual interests," Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "You can see that Iran pursues its interests like a totally normal state, and you can respond to them rationally -- just as we did in negotiations with North Korea, Libya and other places."

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White House reactions haven't been comforting. Hadley and his colleagues let it be announced that the NIE findings only showed that Iran was "vulnerable" -- and that hardline diplomacy works. President Bush himself, addressing the controversy on Tuesday in Washington, said, "I view this report as a warning signal that they had the (weapons) program, they halted the program. The reason why it's a warning signal is they could restart it." He renewed his call for tougher sanctions, "to pressure the Iranian regime to suspend its (nuclear) program."

### 'Why Should We Believe Our Intelligence Agencies?'

The latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the state of Iran's nuclear program had, in fact, already challenged the White House position in mid-November. Qamar al-Huda, an Iran expert at the Washington-based US Institute of Peace, told SPIEGEL ONLINE, "Even the IAEA report, which leaves plenty of room for interpretation, made it a lot harder for Bush to build a coalition in favor of tougher sanctions against

Iran." Right after the report, China announced that it would not discuss the IAEA findings at a planned summit on November 19 with the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and Germany. The six-way talks had to be cancelled.

The State Department's number three man, Nicholas Burns, had already announced an agreement with the Chinese on tougher sanctions after a meeting in Singapore -- but the agreement was made before the National Intelligence Estimate came out. The Russians have remained skeptical, and the American drumbeat for tougher sanctions -- an important topic during Merkel's visit to Texas -- may meet predictable

new obstacles. Sanctions that restrict world commerce have always been unpopular with banks and industry leaders, as Merkel has learned in a [separate domestic debate](#) about China and Russia. And the Americans will have to suffer another round of credibility "issues."

John Alterman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies put it this way, according to the *New York Times*: "The way this will play is that the intelligence community has admitted it was wrong. So why," he said, "should we believe them now?"

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