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Exclusive: *Recent comments by U.S and Israeli military leaders indicate that the intelligence services of the two countries agree that Iran has not decided to build a nuclear bomb, a crack in the Western narrative that the U.S. press corps won't accept, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.*

Has Iran decided to build a nuclear bomb? That would seem to be the central question in the current bellicose debate over whether the world should simply cripple Iran's economy and inflict severe pain on its civilian population or launch a preemptive war to destroy its nuclear capability while possibly achieving "regime change."

And if you've been reading the New York Times or following the rest of the Fawning Corporate Media, you'd likely assume that everyone who matters agrees that the answer to the question is yes, although the FCM adds the caveat that Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. The line is included with an almost perceptible wink and an "oh, yeah."



Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak meeting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2007

However, a consensus seems to be emerging among the intelligence and military agencies of the United States – and Israel – that Iran has NOT made a decision to build a nuclear weapon. In recent days, that judgment has been expressed by high-profile figures in the defense establishments of the two countries – U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

You might think that you would have heard more about that, wouldn't you? U.S. and Israel agree that Iran is NOT building a nuclear bomb. However, this joint assessment that Iran has NOT decided to build a nuclear bomb apparently represented too big a change in the accepted narrative for the Times and the rest of the FCM to process.

Yet, on Jan. 18, the day before U.S. Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey arrived for talks in Israel, Israeli Defense Minister Barak gave an interview to Israeli Army radio in which he addressed with striking candor how he assesses Iran's nuclear program. It was not the normal pabulum.

Question: Is it Israel's judgment that Iran has not yet decided to turn its nuclear potential into weapons of mass destruction?

Barak: ... confusion stems from the fact that people ask whether Iran is determined to break out from the control [inspection] regime right now ... in an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons or an operable installation as quickly as possible. Apparently that is not the case. ...

Question: How long will it take from the moment Iran decides to turn it into effective weapons until it has nuclear warheads?

Barak: I don't know; one has to estimate. ... Some say a year, others say 18 months. It doesn't really matter. To do that, Iran would have to announce it is leaving the [UN International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection regime and stop responding to IAEA's criticism, etc.

Why haven't they [the Iranians] done that? Because they realize that ... when it became clear to everyone that Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, this would constitute definite proof that time is actually running out. This could generate either harsher sanctions or other action against them. They do not want that.

Question: Has the United States asked or demanded that the government inform the Americans in advance, should it decide on military action?

Barak: I don't want to get into that. We have not made a decision to opt for that, we have not decided on a decision-making date. The whole thing is very far off. ...

Question: You said the whole thing is "very far off." Do you mean weeks, months, years?

Barak: I wouldn't want to provide any estimates. It's certainly not urgent. I don't want to relate to it as though tomorrow it will happen.

As noted in my Jan. 19 article, "[Israel Tamps Down Iran War Threats](#)," which was based mostly on reports from the Israeli press before I had access to the complete transcript of the interview, I noted that Barak appeared to be identifying himself with the consistent assessment of U.S. intelligence community since late 2007 that Iran has not made a decision to go forward with a nuclear bomb.

A Momentous NIE

A formal National Intelligence Estimate of November 2007 – a consensus of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies – contradicted the encrusted conventional wisdom that "of course" Iran's nuclear development program must be aimed at producing nuclear weapons. The NIE stated:

"We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; ... Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to

develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005.”

The Key Judgments of that Estimate elicited a vituperative reaction from some Israeli officials and in neoconservative circles in the United States. It also angered then-President George W. Bush, who joined the Israelis in expressing disagreement with the judgments. In January 2008, Bush flew to Israel to commiserate with Israeli officials who he said should have been “furious with the United States over the NIE.”

While Bush’s memoir, *Decision Points*, is replete with bizarre candor, nothing beats his admission that “the NIE tied my hands on the military side,” preventing him from ordering a preemptive war against Iran, an action favored by hawkish Vice President Dick Cheney.

For me personally it was heartening to discover that my former colleagues in the CIA’s analytical division had restored the old ethos of telling difficult truths to power, after the disgraceful years under CIA leaders like George Tenet and John McLaughlin when the CIA followed the politically safer route of telling the powerful what they wanted to hear.

It had been three decades since I chaired a couple of National Intelligence Estimates, but fate never gave me the chance to manage one that played such a key role in preventing an unnecessary and disastrous war — as the November 2007 NIE did.

In such pressure-cooker situations, the Estimates job is not for the malleable or the faint-hearted. The ethos was to speak with courage, and without fear or favor, but that is often easier said than done. In my days, however, we analysts enjoyed career protection for telling it like we saw it. It was an incredible boost to morale to see that happening again in 2007.

Ever since the NIE was published, however, powerful politicians and media pundits have sought to chip away at its conclusions, suggesting that the analysts were hopelessly naïve or politically motivated or vengeful, out to punish Bush and Cheney for the heavy-handed tactics used to push false and dubious claims about Iraq’s WMD in 2002 and 2003.

A New Conventional Wisdom

There emerged in Official Washington a new conventional wisdom that the NIE was erroneous and wasn't worth mentioning anymore. Though the Obama administration has stood by it, the New York Times and other FCM outlets routinely would state that the United States and Israel agreed that Iran was developing a nuclear bomb and then add the wink-wink denial by Iran.

However, on Jan. 8, Defense Secretary Panetta [told](#) Bob Schieffer on "Face the Nation" that "the responsible thing to do right now is to keep putting diplomatic and economic pressure on them [the Iranians] ... and to make sure that they do not make the decision to proceed with the development of a nuclear weapon."

Panetta was making the implicit point that the Iranians had not made that decision, but just in case someone might miss his meaning, Panetta posed the direct question to himself: "Are they [the Iranians] trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No."

Barak's Jan. 18 statement to Israeli Army radio indicated that his views dovetail with those of Panetta – and their comments apparently are backed up by the assessments of each nation's intelligence analysts. In its report on Defense Minister Barak's remarks, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz on Jan. 19 summed up the change in the position of Israeli leaders as follows:

"The intelligence assessment Israeli officials will present ... to Dempsey indicates that Iran has not yet decided whether to make a nuclear bomb. The Israeli view is that while Iran continues to improve its nuclear capabilities, it has not yet decided whether to translate these capabilities into a nuclear weapon – or, more specifically, a nuclear warhead mounted atop a missile. Nor is it clear when Iran might make such a decision."

At the New York Times, the initial coverage of Barak's interview focused on another element. An article by Isabel Kershner and Rick Gladstone appeared on Jan. 19 on page A5 under the headline "Decision on Whether to Attack Iran is 'Far Off,' Israeli Defense Minister Says."

To their credit, the Times' Kershner and Gladstone did not shrink from offering an accurate translation of what Barak said on the key point of IAEA inspections: "The Iranians have not ended the oversight exercised by the International Atomic Energy Agency ... They have not

done that because they know that that would constitute proof of the military nature of their nuclear program and that would provoke stronger international sanctions or other types of action against their country.”

But missing from the Times’ article was Barak’s more direct assessment that Iran apparently had not made a decision to press ahead toward construction of a nuclear bomb. That would have undercut the boilerplate in almost every Times story saying that U.S. and Israeli officials believe Iran is working on a nuclear bomb.

But That’s Not the Right Line!

So, what to do? Not surprisingly, the next day (Jan. 20), the Times ran an article by its Middle East bureau chief Ethan Bronner in which he stated categorically: “Israel and the United States both say that Iran is pursuing the building of nuclear weapons — an assertion denied by Iran — ...”

By Jan. 21, the Times had time to prepare an entire page (A8) of articles setting the record “straight,” so to speak, on Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions: Here are the most telling excerpts, by article (emphasis mine):

1- “European Union Moves Closer to Imposing Tough Sanctions on Iran,” by Steven Erlanger, Paris:

“Senior French officials are concerned that these measures [sanctions] ... will not be strong enough to push the Iranian government into serious, substantive negotiations on **its nuclear program which the West says is aimed at producing weapons.**”

“In his annual speech on French diplomacy on Friday, President Nicolas **Sarkozy accused Iran of lying, and he denounced what he called its ‘senseless race for a nuclear bomb.’**”

“Iran says it is enriching uranium solely for peaceful uses and denies a military intent. But **few in the West believe Tehran, which has not cooperated fully with inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency and has been pursuing some technologies that have only a military use.**”

(Pardon me, please. I'm having a bad flashback. Anyone remember the Times' peerless reporting on those infamous “aluminum tubes” that supposedly were destined for nuclear centrifuges — until some folks did a Google search and found they were for the artillery then used by Iraq?)

2- “China Leader Warns Iran Not to Make Nuclear Arms,” by Michael Wines, Beijing

“Prime Minister Wen Jiabao wrapped up a six-day Middle East tour this week with stronger-than-usual **criticism of Iran's defiance on its nuclear program....**”

“Mr. Wen's comments on Iran were unusually pointed for Chinese diplomacy. In Doha, Qatar's capital, he said China ‘adamantly opposes Iran developing and possessing nuclear weapons.’”

“Western nations suspect that Iran is working toward building a nuclear weapon, while Iran insists its program is peaceful.”

3- “U.S. General Urges Closer Ties With Israel.” by Isabel Kershner, Jerusalem

“Though Iran continues to insist that its nuclear program is only for civilian purposes, Israel, the United States, and much of the West are convinced that Iran is working to develop a weapons program. ...”

Never (Let Up) on Sunday

Next it was time for the Times to trot out David Sanger from the Washington bullpen. Many will remember him as one of the Times' stenographers/cheerleaders for the Bush/Cheney attack on Iraq in March 2003. An effusive hawk also on Iran, Sanger was promoted to a position as chief Washington correspondent, apparently for services rendered.

In his Jan. 22 article, "Confronting Iran in a Year of Elections," Sanger pulls out all the stops, even resurrecting Condoleezza Rice's "mushroom cloud" to scare all of us — and, not least, the Iranians. He wrote:

"From the perception of the Iranians, life may look better on the other side of the **mushroom cloud,**' said Ray Takeyh, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He may be right: while the Obama administration has vowed that it will never tolerate Iran as a nuclear weapons state, a few officials admit that they may have to settle for a 'nuclear capable' Iran that has the technology, the nuclear fuel and the expertise to become a nuclear power in a matter of weeks or months."

Were that not enough, enter the national champion of the Times cheerleading squad that prepared the American people in 2002 and early 2003 for the attack on Iraq, former Executive Editor Bill Keller. He graced us the next day (Jan. 23) with an op-ed entitled "Bomb-Bomb-Bomb, Bomb-Bomb-Iran?" — though he wasn't favoring a military strike, at least not right now. Here's Keller:

"The actual state of the [nuclear] program is not entirely clear, but the best open-source estimates are that if Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered full-speed-ahead — which there is no sign he has done — they could have an actual weapon in a year or so. ... In practice, Obama's policy promises to be tougher than Bush's. Because Obama started out with an offer of direct talks — which the Iranians foolishly spurned — world opinion has shifted in our direction."

Wow. With Iraqi egg still all over his face, the disgraced Keller gets to "spurn" history itself — to rewrite the facts. Sorry, Bill, it was not Iran, but rather Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other neocons in the U.S. Department of State and White House (with you and neocon allies in the press cheering them on), who "foolishly spurned" an offer by Iran in 2010 to trade about half its low-enriched uranium for medical isotopes. It was a deal negotiated by Turkey and Brazil, but it was viewed by the neocons as an obstacle to ratcheting up the sanctions.

In his Jan. 23 column, with more sophomoric glibness, Keller wrote this:

“We may now have sufficient global support to enact the one measure that would be genuinely crippling — a boycott of Iranian oil. The Iranians take this threat to their economic livelihood seriously enough that people who follow the subject no longer minimize the chance of a naval confrontation in the Strait of Hormuz. It’s not impossible that we will get war with Iran even without bombing its nuclear facilities.”

How neat! War without even trying!

The Paper of (Checkered Record)

Guidance To All NYT Hands: Are you getting the picture? After all, what does Defense Minister Barak know? Or Defense Secretary Panetta? Or the 16 agencies of the U.S. intelligence community? Or apparently even Israeli intelligence?

The marching orders from the Times’ management appear to be that you should pay no heed to those sources of information. Just repeat the mantra: Everyone knows Iran is hard at work on the Bomb.

As is well known, other newspapers and media outlets take their cue from the Times. Small wonder, then, that USA Today seemed to be following the same guidance on Jan. 23, as can be seen in its major editorial on military action against Iran:

“The U.S. and Iran will keep steaming toward confrontation, Iran intent on acquiring the bomb to establish itself as a regional power, and the U.S. intent on preventing it to protect allies and avoid a nuclear arms race in the world’s most volatile region.

“One day, the U.S. is likely to face a wrenching choice: bomb Iran, with the nation fully united and prepared for the consequences, or let Iran have the weapons, along with a Cold War-like doctrine ensuring Iran’s nuclear annihilation if it ever uses them. In that context, sanctions remain the last best hope for a satisfactory solution.”

And, of course, the U.S. press corps almost never adds the context that Israel already possesses an undeclared arsenal of hundreds of nuclear weapons, or that Iran is essentially surrounded by nuclear weapons states, including India, Pakistan, Russia, China and – at sea – the United States.

PBS Equally Guilty

PBS’s behavior adhered to its customary don’t-offend-the-politicians-who-might-otherwise-cut-our-budget attitude on the Jan. 18 “NewsHour” – about 12 hours after Ehud Barak’s interview started making the rounds. Host Margaret Warner set the stage for an interview with neocon Dennis Ross and Vali Nasr (a professor at Tufts) by using a thoroughly misleading clip from former Sen. Rick Santorum’s Jan. 1 appearance on “Meet the Press.”

Warner started by saying: “Back in the U.S. many Republican presidential candidates have been vowing they’d be even tougher with Tehran. Former Senator Rick Santorum spoke on NBC’s Meet the Press: ‘I would be saying to the Iranians, you open up those facilities, you begin to dismantle them and make them available to inspectors, or we will degrade those facilities through air strikes and make it very public that we are doing so.’”

Santorum seemed totally unaware that there are U.N. inspectors in Iran, and host David Gregory did nothing to correct him, leaving Santorum’s remark unchallenged. The blogosphere immediately lit up with requests for NBC to tell their viewers that there are already U.N. inspectors in Iran, which unlike Israel is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and allows IAEA inspections.

During the Warner interview, Dennis Ross performed true to form, projecting supreme confidence that he knows more about Iran’s nuclear program than the Israeli Defense Minister and the U.S. intelligence community combined:

Margaret Warner: If you hamstring their [Iran's] Central Bank, and the U.S. persuades all these other big customers not to buy Iranian oil, that could be thought of as an act of war on the part of the Iranians. Is that a danger?

Ross: I think there's a context here. The context is that **the Iranians continue to pursue a nuclear program. And unmistakably to many, that is a nuclear program whose purpose is to achieve nuclear weapons.** That has a very high danger, a very high consequence. So the idea that they could continue with that and not realize that at some point they have to make a choice, and if they don't make the choice, the price they're going to pay is a very high one, that's the logic of increasing the pressure.

Never mind that the Israeli Defense Minister had told the press something quite different some 12 hours before.

Still, it is interesting that Barak's comments on how Israeli intelligence views Iran's nuclear program now mesh so closely with the NIE in 2007. This is the new and significant story here, as I believe any objective journalist would agree.

However, the FCM — led by the New York Times — cannot countenance admitting that they have been hyping the threat from Iran as they did with Iraq's non-existent WMDs just nine years ago. So they keep repeating the line that Israel and the U.S. agree that Iran is building a nuclear weapon.

In this up-is-down world, America's newspaper of record won't even report accurately what Israel (or the CIA) thinks on this important issue, if that goes against the alarmist conventional wisdom that the neocons favor. Thus, we have this divergence between what the U.S. media is reporting as flat fact — i.e., that Israel and the United States believe Iran is building a bomb (though Iran denies it) — and the statements from senior Israeli and U.S. officials that Iran has NOT decided to build a bomb.

While this might strike some as splitting hairs — since peaceful nuclear expertise can have

potential military use – this hair is a very important one. If Iran is not working on building a nuclear bomb, then the threats of preemptive war are not only unjustified, they could be exactly the motivation for Iran to decide that it does need a nuclear bomb to protect itself and its people.