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On Iran, lessons from Iraq?



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There are lessons for handling Iran's nuclear program in the declassified CIA self-analysis of its misreading of the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's reaction to U.N.

inspections of his weapons-of-mass-destruction program.

Equally interesting in the report is how Hussein misjudged the capability of international inspectors and the responses — sanctions and then military action — that would come from the United States and its allies.

Are these errors that Iran may be making?

The 16-page report, first disclosed 13 days ago by the National Security Archive at George Washington University, concludes with some findings relevant to the Iran situation.

The study, done in 2006, found that CIA analysts wrongly “tended to focus on what was most important to us — the hunt for WMD (weapons of mass destruction) — and less on what would be most important for a paranoid dictatorship to protect.”

Today, the U.S. government views Iran's actions — many permitted by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) — as signs of a country seeking a nuclear weapons capability, if not the weapons themselves.

Why? Because Iran's original move to build its own enrichment facilities were undertaken secretly and acknowledged only after being discovered by U.S. intelligence and publicized by anti-Tehran exiles.

The CIA report draws attention to Iraq's “cheat and retreat” policy in the early 1990s of concealing WMD items and activities. The United States and its allies saw the efforts as coverups that validated intelligence analysts’ “assessments that Iraq intended to deny, deceive, and maintain forbidden capabilities.” Thus, when Iraq decided in 1995 to destroy its existing WMDs and come clean, after Hussein's son-in-law defected and talked about the programs, there was doubt.

Has Iran's original deceptions and subsequent intransigence

to disregard Tehran's claim that it wants to make fuel only for its research reactors and power plants?

The CIA report cautions that U.S. analysts should have viewed Hussein's late WMD disclosures through “an Iraqi prism.” They would have seen that Iraqis wanted to protect “their reputation, their security, their overall technological capabilities and their status needed to be preserved,” according to the report.

The lesson for today is not to accept Iran's current defiance of the U.N. Security Council as proof that Tehran wants a bomb. The CIA report notes that in Iraq's case, “deceptions were perpetrated and detected, but the reasons for those deceptions were misread.”

The current cleanup at Iran's Parchin military base, while delaying a visit from inspectors with the International Atomic Energy Agency, is being viewed as Tehran trying to hide previous work on possible weapons-building experiments. The CIA report says that “Baghdad destroyed rather than revealed items, attempting to make its inaccurate assertions of no program correct in a legalistic sense.” Such Iraqi attempts “to find face-saving means to disclose previously hidden information, however, reinforced the idea that Baghdad was deceptive and unreliable,” the CIA said.

The CIA report also showed that some U.S. and U.N. actions led Iraq's leaders to believe the goal was to change the ruling regime rather than just halt Tehran's WMD program. Two steps were noted: one was when U.N. inspectors began to look into Iraq's security apparatus and concealment apparatus; the other was when the U.S. Congress in 1998 approved the Iraq Liberation Act, which provided funds to Iraqi exile groups.

The Obama administration halted the Bush policy of regime change for Iran, but many Republicans still favor it. Some Iranian officials see a pattern in IAEA inspectors seeking to add additional sites for visits that can only end with regime change. They also weigh presidential and congressional campaign statements for signs that regime

The report reviews Hussein's misjudgment that the United States would not invade and at worst would only bomb suspected WMD sites, as it had done in 1998. He and his leadership “believed the United States did not have the forces to invade Iraq and press reports that said Washington was not willing to sacrifice U.S. lives.”

Iran may face threats of military action by the United States and Israel, but neither country appears prepared at this time to contemplate an invasion.

One other cautionary note from the study: When, in fact, Iraq provided its report that said it had destroyed its WMD arms and ended its WMD programs, “past Iraqi deceptions led to suspicion of Iraq's motives” and its leaders “would have had to take specific steps with [U.N. inspectors] to overcome perceptions of dishonesty.”

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, repeated on Aug. 30 assurances that Iran wants only to pursue peaceful uses of atomic energy and is not seeking a nuclear weapon. As early as 2006, he issued a religious fatwa that said the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons was forbidden under Islam.

Some current and former U.S. officials believe that this tie to Islamic law provides Khamenei with a means to strike a deal with the West to limit enrichment to low levels. But the broader reaction is that Iran could forget about Islamic law if domestic or foreign events lead to a decision to build a bomb.

George Santayana's warning is relevant: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

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