



## Questionable intelligence on Iran

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The recent release of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report on Iran's nuclear program has been received by critics of the Bush administration as vindication of their insistence that Iran poses no threat to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region and beyond.

The key judgment -- Tehran halted its nuclear program in the fall of 2003 -- is surrounded by extensive qualifications indicating difficulties in assessing Iranian nuclear intentions, and that the NIE "does not assume that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons."

In refusing to make such an assumption, the intelligence community does not tell the world, as the French and German leaders now fear in their public statements, why

Tehran invested in a nuclear program until 2003.

But then American intelligence does not deny what the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have indicated to the world, that Tehran remains engaged in the enrichment of uranium.

The distinction between "military" and "civilian" uses of enriched uranium is artificial since an unmonitored civilian program carries the risks of being used for military purposes.

Since this NIE report reverses its earlier assessment on Iran's nuclear program, it raises more questions than it answers about the business of intelligence and understanding of Iranian political culture.

Intelligence is murky business. It is akin to trying to draw meaning from shadows, or reading tea leaves in a moving stream.

American intelligence, unlike that of other countries, has a history of spectacular failures in misreading events, or being surprised by unexpected events.

Perhaps the most spectacular failure of the United States was in misjudging how soon the former Soviet Union ended America's nuclear monopoly in August 1949 by testing its own atomic weapon.

Recently Russian President Vladimir Putin posthumously awarded George Koval -- an American-born Soviet spy -- with the highest honour of the Russian state for successfully providing critical information on the U.S. Manhattan project during the Second World War.

The story of George Koval, code-named Delmar and trained by Stalin's ruthless spy masters, tells us how greatly unaware American intelligence was about the U.S.'s most secret war program -- the building of the atomic bomb -- being penetrated by a Communist agent.

On Iran, U.S. intelligence has been disastrously wrong. It had no clue of revolution erupting when president

Jimmy Carter toasted the late Shah in Tehran on New Year's Eve 1978 for making Iran "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world."

Since then terror-exporting and radical Islamic Iran, established by Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers in 1979, remains mostly a black hole for American intelligence.

Moreover, assessing the intentions of Iranian decision makers is a beguiling task since tactics of intentionally misinforming or blatantly lying is sanctioned by the Shiite practice of "taqiyyah" (dissembling or concealing truth).

The NIE judgment about Iran halting its nuclear program in 2003 is stated without evidence or reason. Could it be that this occurred -- if it did -- because of regime change in Baghdad?

But the world witnessed in December 2003 the Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, publicly dismantle his covert nuclear weapons program, and it was unmistakable that he had drawn a cautionary lesson from Saddam Hussein's fall.

Hence, prudence dictates and demands remaining skeptical over intelligence on Iran.