



Acts of War

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By Scott Ritter

The war between the United States and Iran is on. American taxpayer dollars are being used, with the permission of Congress, to fund activities that result in Iranians being killed and wounded, and Iranian property destroyed. This wanton violation of a nation's sovereignty would not be tolerated if the tables were turned and Americans were being subjected to Iranian-funded covert actions that took the lives of Americans, on American soil, and destroyed American property and livelihood. Many Americans remain unaware of what is transpiring abroad in their name. Many of those who are cognizant of these activities are supportive of them, an outgrowth of misguided sentiment which holds Iran accountable for a list of grievances used by the U.S. government to justify the ongoing global war on terror. Iran, we are told, is not just a nation pursuing nuclear weapons, but is the largest state sponsor of terror in the world today.

Much of the information behind this is being promulgated by Israel, which has a vested interest in seeing Iran neutralized as a potential threat. But Israel is joined by another source, even more puzzling in terms of its broad-based acceptance in the world of American journalism: the Mujahadeen-e Khalk, or MEK, an Iranian opposition group sworn to overthrow the theocracy in Tehran. The CIA today provides material support to the actions of the MEK inside Iran. The recent spate of explosions in Iran, including a particularly devastating "accident" involving a military convoy transporting ammunition in downtown Tehran, appears to be linked to an MEK operation; its agents working inside munitions manufacturing plants deliberately are committing acts of sabotage which lead to such explosions. If CIA money and planning support are behind these actions, the agency's backing constitutes nothing less than an act of war on the part of the United States against Iran.

The MEK traces its roots back to the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeg. Formed among students and intellectuals, the MEK emerged in the 1960s as a serious threat to the reign of Reza Shah Pahlevi. Facing brutal repression from the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK, the MEK became expert at blending into Iranian society, forming a cellular organizational structure which made it virtually impossible to eradicate. The MEK membership also became adept at gaining access to positions of sensitivity and authority. When the Shah was overthrown in 1978, the MEK played a major role and for a while worked hand in glove with the Islamic Revolution in crafting a post-Shah Iran. In 1979 the MEK had a central role in orchestrating the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, and holding 55 Americans hostage for 444 days.

However, relations between the MEK and the Islamic regime in Tehran soured, and after the MEK staged a bloody coup attempt in 1981, all ties were severed and the two sides engaged in a violent civil war. Revolutionary Guard members who were active at that time have acknowledged how difficult it was to fight the MEK. In the end, massive acts of arbitrary arrest, torture and executions were required to break the back of mainstream MEK activity in Iran, although even the Revolutionary Guard today admits the MEK remains active and is virtually impossible to completely eradicate.

It is this stubborn ability to survive and operate inside Iran, at a time when no other intelligence service can establish and maintain a meaningful agent network there, which makes the MEK such an asset to nations such as the United States and Israel. The MEK is able to provide some useful intelligence; however, its overall value as an intelligence resource is negatively impacted by the fact that it is the sole source of human intelligence in Iran. As such, the group has taken to exaggerating and fabricating reports to serve its own political agenda. In this way, there is little to differentiate the MEK from another Middle Eastern expatriate opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress, or INC, which infamously supplied inaccurate intelligence to the United States and other governments and helped influence the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein. Today, the MEK sees itself in a similar role, providing sole-sourced intelligence to the United States and Israel in an effort to facilitate American military operations against Iran and, eventually, to overthrow the Islamic regime in Tehran.

The current situation concerning the MEK would be laughable if it were not for the violent reality of that organization's activities. Upon its arrival in Iraq in 1986, the group was placed under the control of Saddam Hussein's Mukhabarat, or intelligence service. The MEK was a heavily militarized organization and in 1988 participated in division-size military operations against Iran. The organization represents no state and can be found on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations, yet since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the MEK has been under the protection of the U.S. military. Its fighters are even given "protected status" under the Geneva Conventions. The MEK says its members in Iraq are refugees, not terrorists. And yet one would be hard-pressed to find why the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees should confer refugee status on an active paramilitary organization that uses "refugee camps" inside Iraq as its bases.

The MEK is behind much of the intelligence being used by the International Atomic Energy Agency in building its case that Iran may be pursuing (or did in fact pursue in the past) a nuclear weapons program. The complexity of the MEK-CIA relationship was recently underscored by the agency's acquisition of a laptop computer allegedly containing numerous secret documents pertaining to an Iranian nuclear weapons program. Much has been made about this computer and its contents. The United States has led the charge against Iran within international diplomatic circles, citing the laptop information as the primary source proving Iran's ongoing involvement in clandestine nuclear weapons activity. Of course, the information on the computer, being derived from questionable sources (i.e., the MEK and the CIA, both sworn enemies of Iran) is controversial and its veracity is questioned by many, including me.

Now, I have a simple solution to the issue of the laptop computer: Give it the UNSCOM treatment. Assemble a team of CIA, FBI and Defense Department forensic computer analysts and probe the computer, byte by byte. Construct a chronological record of how and when the data on the computer were assembled. Check the "logic" of the data, making sure everything fits together in a manner consistent with the computer's stated function and use. Tell us when the computer was turned on and logged into and how it was used. Then, with this complex usage template constructed, overlay the various themes which have been derived from the computer's contents, pertaining to projects, studies and other activities of interest. One should be able to rapidly ascertain whether or not the computer is truly a key piece of intelligence pertaining to Iran's nuclear programs.

The fact that this computer is acknowledged as coming from the MEK and the fact that a proper forensic investigation would probably demonstrate the fabricated nature of the data contained are why the U.S. government will never agree to such an investigation being done. A prosecutor, when making a case of criminal action, must lay out evidence in a simple, direct manner, allowing not only the judge and jury to see it but also the accused. If the evidence is as strong as the prosecutor maintains, it is usually bad news for the defendant. However, if the defendant is able to demonstrate inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the data being presented, then the prosecution is the one in trouble. And if the defense is able to demonstrate that the entire case is built upon fabricated evidence, the case is generally thrown out. This, in short, is what should be done with the IAEA's ongoing probe into allegations that Iran has pursued nuclear weapons. The evidence used by the IAEA is unable to withstand even the most rudimentary cross-examination. It is speculative at best, and most probably fabricated. Iran has done the right thing in refusing to legitimize this illegitimate source of information.

A key question that must be asked is why, then, does the IAEA continue to permit Olli Heinonen, the agency's Finnish deputy director for safeguards and the IAEA official responsible for the ongoing technical inspections in Iran, to wage his one-man campaign on behalf of the United States, Britain and (indirectly) Israel regarding allegations derived from sources of such questionable veracity (the MEK-supplied laptop computer)? Moreover, why is such an official given free rein to discuss such sensitive data with the press, or with politically motivated outside agencies, in a manner that results in questionable allegations appearing in the public arena as unquestioned fact? Under normal circumstances, leaks of the sort that have occurred regarding the ongoing investigation into Iran's alleged past studies on nuclear weapons would be subjected to a thorough investigation to determine the source and to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to end them. And yet, in Vienna, Heinonen's repeated transgressions are treated as a giant "non-event," the 800-pound gorilla in the room that everyone pretends isn't really there.

Heinonen has become the pro-war yin to the anti-confrontation yang of his boss, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei. Every time ElBaradei releases the results of the IAEA probe of Iran, pointing out that the IAEA can find no evidence of any past or present nuclear weapons program, and that there is a full understanding of Iran's controversial centrifuge-based enrichment program, Heinonen throws a monkey wrench into the works. Well-publicized briefings are given to IAEA-based diplomats. Mysteriously, leaks from undisclosed sources occur. Heinonen's Finnish nationality serves as a flimsy cover for neutrality that long ago disappeared. He is no longer serving in the role as unbiased inspector, but rather a front for the active pursuit of an American- and Israeli-inspired disinformation campaign designed to keep alive the flimsy allegations of a nonexistent Iranian nuclear weapons program in order to justify the continued warlike stance taken by the U.S. and Israel against Iran.

The fact that the IAEA is being used as a front to pursue this blatantly anti-Iranian propaganda is a disservice to an organization with a mission of vital world importance. The interjection of not only the unverified (and unverifiable) MEK laptop computer data, side by side with a newly placed emphasis on a document relating to the forming of uranium metal into hemispheres of the kind useful in a nuclear weapon, is an amateurish manipulation of data to achieve a preordained outcome. Calling the Iranian possession of the aforementioned document "alarming," Heinonen (and the media) skipped past the history of the document, which, of course, has been well explained by Iran previously as something the Pakistani nuclear proliferator A.Q. Khan inserted on his own volition to a delivery of documentation pertaining to centrifuges. Far from being a "top-secret" document protected by Iran's security services, it was discarded in a file of old material that Iran provided to the IAEA inspectors. When the IAEA found the document, Iran allowed it to be fully examined by the inspectors, and answered every question posed by the IAEA about how the document came to be in Iran. For Heinonen to call the document "alarming," at this late stage in the game, is not only irresponsible but factually inaccurate, given the definition of the word. The Iranian document in question is neither a cause for alarm, seeing as it is not a source for any "sudden fear brought on by the sense of danger," nor does it provide any "warning of existing or approaching danger," unless one is speaking of the danger of military action on the part of the United States derived from Heinonen's unfortunate actions and choice of words.

Olli Heinonen might as well become a salaried member of the Bush administration, since he is operating in lock step with the U.S. government's objective of painting Iran as a threat worthy of military action. Shortly after Heinonen's alarmist briefing in March 2008, the U.S. ambassador to the IAEA, Gregory Schulte, emerged to announce, "As today's briefing showed us, there are strong reasons to suspect that Iran was working covertly and deceitfully, at least until recently, to build a bomb." Heinonen's briefing provided nothing of the sort, being derived from an irrelevant document and a laptop computer of questionable provenance. But that did not matter to Schulte, who noted that "Iran has refused to explain or even acknowledge past work on weaponization." Schulte did not bother to note that it would be difficult for Iran to explain or acknowledge that which it has not done. "This is particularly troubling," Schulte went on, "when combined with Iran's determined effort to master the technology to enrich uranium." Why is this so troubling? Because, as Schulte noted, "Uranium enrichment is not necessary for Iran's civil program but it is necessary to produce the fissile material that could be weaponized into a bomb."

This, of course, is the crux of the issue: Iran's ongoing enrichment program. Not because it is illegal; Iran is permitted to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Not again because Iran's centrifuge program is operating in an undeclared, unmonitored fashion; the IAEA had stated it has a full understanding of the scope and work of the Iranian centrifuge enrichment program and that all associated nuclear material is accounted for and safeguarded. The problem has never been, and will never be, Iran's enrichment program. The problem is American policy objectives of regime change in Iran, pushed by a combination of American desires for global hegemony and an activist Israeli agenda which seeks regional security, in perpetuity, through military and economic supremacy. The specter of nuclear enrichment is simply a vehicle for facilitating the larger policy objectives. Olli Heinonen, and those who support and sustain his work, must be aware of the larger geopolitical context of his actions, which makes them all the more puzzling and contemptible.

A major culprit in this entire sordid affair is the mainstream media. Displaying an almost uncanny inability to connect the dots, the editors who run America's largest newspapers, and the producers who put together America's biggest television news programs, have collectively facilitated the most simplistic, inane and factually unfounded story lines coming out of the Bush White House. The most recent fairy tale was one of "diplomacy," on the part of one William Burns, the No. 3 diplomat in the State Department.

I have studied the minutes of meetings involving John McCloy, an American official who served numerous administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, in the decades following the end of the Second World War. His diplomacy with the Soviets, conducted with senior Soviet negotiator Valerejn Zorin and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev himself, was real, genuine, direct and designed to resolve differences. The transcripts of the diplomacy conducted between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho to bring an end to the Vietnam conflict is likewise a study in the give and take required to achieve the status of real diplomacy.

Sending a relatively obscure official like Burns to "observe" a meeting between the European Union and Iran, with instructions *not* to interact, *not* to initiate, *not* to discuss, cannot under any circumstances be construed as diplomacy. Any student of diplomatic history could tell you this. And yet the esteemed editors and news producers used the term *diplomacy*, without challenge or clarification, to describe Burns' mission to Geneva on July 19. The decision to send him there was hailed as a "significant concession" on the part of the Bush administration, a step away from war and an indication of a new desire within the White House to resolve the Iranian impasse through diplomacy. How this was going to happen with a diplomat hobbled and muzzled to the degree Burns was apparently skipped the attention of these writers and their bosses. Diplomacy, America was told, was the new policy option of choice for the Bush administration.

Of course, the Geneva talks produced nothing. The United States had made sure Europe, through its foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, had no maneuvering room when it came to the core issue of uranium enrichment: Iran must suspend all enrichment before any movement could be made on any other issue. Furthermore, the American-backed program of investigation concerning the MEK-supplied laptop computer further poisoned the diplomatic waters. Iran, predictably, refused to suspend its enrichment program, and rejected the Heinonen-led investigation into nuclear weaponization, refusing to cooperate further with the IAEA on that matter, noting that it fell outside the scope of the IAEA's mandate in Iran.

Condoleezza Rice was quick to respond. After a debriefing from Burns, who flew to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, where Rice was holding closed-door meetings with the foreign ministers of six Arab nations on the issue of Iran, Rice told the media that Iran "was not serious" about resolving the standoff. Having played the diplomacy card, Rice moved on with the real agenda: If Iran did not fully cooperate with the international community (i.e., suspend its enrichment program), then it would face a new round of economic sanctions and undisclosed punitive measures, both unilaterally on the part of the United States and Europe, as well as in the form of even broader sanctions from the United Nations Security Council (although it is doubtful that Russia and China would go along with such a plan).

The issue of unilateral U.S. sanctions is most worrisome. Both the House of Representatives, through HR 362, and the Senate, through SR 580, are preparing legislation that would call for an air, ground and sea blockade of Iran. Back in October 1962, President John F. Kennedy, when considering the imposition of a naval blockade against Cuba in response to the presence of Soviet missiles in that nation, opined that "a blockade is a major military operation, too. It's an act of war." Which, of course, it is. The false diplomacy waged by the White House in Geneva simply pre-empted any

congressional call for a diplomatic outreach. Now the president can move on with the mission of facilitating a larger war with Iran by legitimizing yet another act of aggression.

One day, in the not-so-distant future, Americans will awake to the reality that American military forces are engaged in a shooting war with Iran. Many will scratch their heads and wonder, "How did that happen?" The answer is simple: We all let it happen. We are at war with Iran right now. We just don't have the moral courage to admit it.

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AP photo / Brennan Linsley

Members of the Iranian resistance group Mujahadeen-e Khalk, or MEK, guard a road leading to the group's main training camp, watched over by a U.S. Army Abrams tank in background, near Baqubah in north-central Iraq.

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