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Iran Uses Fear of Covert Nuclear Sites to Deter Attack

By Gareth Porter

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The *New York Times* reported Tuesday that Iran had "quietly hidden an increasingly large part of its atomic complex" in a vast network of tunnels and bunkers buried in mountainsides.

The story continued a narrative begun last September, when a second Iranian uranium enrichment facility near Qom was reported to have been discovered by U.S. and Western intelligence. The premise of that narrative is that Iran wanted secret nuclear facilities in order to be able to make a nuclear weapon without being detected by the international community.

But all the evidence indicates that the real story is exactly the opposite: far from wanting to hide the existence of nuclear facilities from the outside world, Iran has wanted Western intelligence to conclude that it was putting some of its key nuclear facilities deep underground for more than three years.

The reason for that surprising conclusion is simple: Iran's primary problem in regard to its nuclear program has been how to deter a U.S. or Israeli attack on its nuclear sites. To do that, Iranian officials believed they needed to convince U.S. and Israeli military planners that they wouldn't be able to destroy some of Iran's nuclear sites and couldn't identify others.

The key to unraveling the confusion surrounding the Qom facility and the system of tunnel complexes is the fact that Iran knew the site at Qom was being closely watched by U.S. and other intelligence agencies both through satellite photographs and spy networks on the ground well before construction of the facility began.

The National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI), the political arm of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq anti-regime terrorist organization, held a press conference on Dec. 20, 2005, in which it charged that four underground tunnel complexes were connected with Iran's nuclear program, including one near Qom.

NCRI had created very strong international pressure on Iran's nuclear program by revealing the existence of the Natanz enrichment facility in an August 2002 press conference. A number of its charges had been referred to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for investigation.

It is now clear that there was nothing in the tunnel complex at Qom related to the nuclear program when the NCRI made that charge.

Given the close ties between the MEK and both the U.S. and Israel, however, Iran's decision-makers had to be well aware that foreign intelligence agencies would focus their surveillance in Iran on the tunnel complexes that the MEK had identified.

U.S. and European officials have confirmed that systematic surveillance of the site by satellite photography began in 2006.

What happened next is a particularly important clue to Iran's strategy. According to multiple sources, an anti-aircraft battery was moved to the base of the mountain into which the tunnel complex had been dug.

That was a clear indication that Iranian officials not only knew the site was under surveillance but wanted to draw attention to it.

That move prompted serious debate within the intelligence community. French security consultant Roland Jacquard, who had contacts in the intelligence community, recalled to *Time* magazine last October that some analysts suggested that it could be a "decoy," aimed at fixing intelligence attention on that site, while the real nuclear facilities were being built elsewhere.

If Iran had believed the site was not under surveillance, there would have been no reason to move an anti-aircraft battery to it.

That anti-aircraft battery was evidently intended to ensure that foreign intelligence would be watching as construction of a new facility continued at Qom. Satellite imagery that has been obtained by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in Washington, D.C., shows that construction of the facility began sometime between mid-2006 and mid-2007, according to satellite imagery interpretation specialist Paul Brannan of the ISIS.

Of course, intelligence analysts could not be certain of the site's precise purpose until a later stage of construction. A senior U.S. intelligence official revealed in the Sept. 25 briefing that the analysts were not confident that it was indeed an enrichment facility until sometime in spring 2009.

Meanwhile, the Iranians were providing foreign intelligence agencies with clear evidence it would use a "passive defense strategy" to protect its nuclear facilities. In a statement on Iranian television Sept. 24, 2007, the chairman of the Passive Defense Organization, Gholam Reza Jalali, said the strategy would "conceal and protect the country's important and sensitive facilities, [which] would minimize their vulnerability."

Jalali revealed to Mehr news agency Aug. 24, 2007, that a nuclear installation monitored by the IAEA was part of the plan. As the *New York Times* reported Tuesday, tunnels have been built into mountains near the Isfahan uranium conversion complex.

News media have consistently reported that Iran informed the IAEA about the Qom facility in a letter Sept. 21 only because the site had been discovered by Western intelligence.

But a set of questions and answers issued by the Barack Obama administration the same day as the press briefing admitted "We do not know" in answer to the question "Why did the Iranians decide to reveal this facility at this time?"

In fact, Iran's Sept. 21 letter to the IAEA, an excerpt of which was published in the Nov. 16 IAEA report, appears to have been part of the strategy of confusing U.S. and Israeli war planners. It stated that the construction of a second enrichment facility had been "based on [its] sovereign right of safeguarding ... sensitive nuclear facilities through various means such as utilization of passive defense systems."

As *Time* magazine's John Barry noted in an Oct. 2 story, the letter was read by intelligence analysts as suggesting that among the more than a dozen tunnel sites being closely monitored were more undisclosed nuclear sites.

A few days later, the Iranian daily *Kayhan*, which is very close to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said the announcement of the site had helped to foil plans for a military strike by the West, because "the multiplicity of facilities is a very effective defensive action."

That statement hinted that Iran was able to complicate the task of U.S. and Israeli military planners by introducing uncertainty about where additional nuclear facilities might be hidden.

The *New York Times* article on Iran's tunnel complex indicates that Iran's strategy has succeeded in influencing on debates in Israel and the United States over the feasibility of a devastating blow to the Iranian nuclear program. The *Times* called the tunneling system "a cloak of invisibility" that is "complicating the West's military and geopolitical calculus."

It said some analysts consider Iran's "passive defense" strategy "a crucial factor" in the Obama administration's insistence on a non-military solution.

One indication of that the Iranian strategy has had an impact on Israeli calculations is that Maj. Gen. Aharon Ze'evi Farkash, the head of intelligence for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) from 2002 to 2006, supported an attack on Iran by the U.S. Air Force – a standard Israeli position – at a meeting at the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy last October.

But Farkash warned that Western intelligence still may not know about all of Iran's nuclear sites. In other statements, Farkash has opposed an Israeli strike.