



The Manufactured Iran Scare

Guest: Gareth Porter

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Gareth Porter is an investigative journalist and author of [Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare](#).

[Note: Because of an audio glitch in this episode, there were some hiccups in the conversation. These are noted in the transcript.]

WOODS: I have now read two pieces in a row by people who say that your book *Manufactured Crisis* is one of the most important and just devastating works of investigative journalism of at least the past 10 years—and in the Internet age, where you’ve got an explosion in journalism, that is really saying something. So before we get into the meat of what’s been going on, let’s say, in the past few years with Iran, I wonder if you can start off by talking about how far back the pattern of deception regarding the Iranian nuclear program extends.

PORTER: Well, you know, I would say that in some sense the beginning point, and the point where I pick up the story in my book, the beginning point of deception, that is, is the end of the George H.W. Bush administration and the beginning of the Clinton administration, and I point out that there’s a historical turning point there that really helps to explain why that is the beginning of the deception. You have in fact two things happening in 1990 and 1991: the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of course the first Gulf War. Those two events had enormous bureaucratic significance for the national security state of the United States because they were clearly desperate for a replacement for the Soviet threat, and I document the way in which the threat of WMD proliferation in general, and the threat from Iran in particular were groomed by the CIA as well as the Pentagon to [hiccup]. So that is really the beginning, in short, of the deception because they really [hiccup] the threat of Iran without having any evidence at that point. There simply was no evidence to support that.

WOODS: Doesn’t this become less a matter of there being, let’s say, an absence of evidence, or it’s a matter of maybe an educated guess, but there is maybe a case to be made that there’s positive evidence against the existence of this program. Now, obviously you can’t prove a negative. But in other words it wasn’t that American officials were acting in good will and they just made a mistake about the Iranian nuclear program. They were actively involved in a series of lies. Isn’t that how you would put it?

PORTER: Well, I think there’s a combination here. This is a more complicated story than simply saying it was all lies. Certainly, there was a major central element of active disinformation here, which was from Israel in particular, that is to say the creation of a [hiccup] documents which essentially constituted a false intelligence file which was to be the basis for a planned, anticipated war for regime change in Iran, and clearly there were certain people within the Bush administration, and I would count later ambassador John Bolton as the primary one because he dealt directly with the Israelis in regard to the U.S. [hiccup] toward Iran. So there’s no doubt in my mind that Bolton was well aware of what the Israelis were doing. I point out that in 2003, in June 2003, Bolton actually took a trip to Israel which was not authorized by the State Department. He met with the Director of Mossad, and that was the meeting that was not authorized, and therefore, there was no [hiccup] through State Department channels to show what actually happened at the meeting, and a few weeks later, as we know from a book published later on by two American journalists, Douglas France and Kathleen Collins, Israel’s Mossad created a new office in the summer of 2003 which was responsible specifically for influencing world opinion and particularly through the news media about the

Iranian nuclear program. So we know the Israelis created an instrument there which was arguably the one that was both capable and had the mandate to carry out that sort of disinformation. So I think it's very clear that it was a disinformation campaign, and I go into it in great depth in the book.

On the other hand, we also have, I think, the phenomenon of the U.S. intelligence community, in a sense, fooling itself for many years beginning in the early 1990s just on the basis that they were inferring a nuclear weapons intent and later on a nuclear weapons program without having any evidence. They came up with that analysis based on the idea that well, there can't be any other explanation for the Iranian nuclear program. They don't really need nuclear power, and after all, that gives them the capability for nuclear weapons, and along with a few other bits and pieces of information which were misinterpreted, which I talk about in the book, that was the basis for a whole series of intelligence assessments beginning in the 1990s and continuing through the Bush administration with three major national intelligence estimates, ending with the one in 2007, all of which were mistaken fundamentally in coming out with the conclusion that Iran did indeed have a nuclear weapons program. So I think this pattern that we've seen develop over the years is a combination of both disinformation and sort of self-deception, if you will, on the part of the U.S. intelligence community, and I think that constitutes an even more devastating problem than would have been the case had it been just deception by the Israelis.

WOODS: Gareth, how is a layman to assess the kinds of claims that he might encounter in the media when politicians are quoted, Israeli politicians, American politicians, as saying that Iran is only x-weeks or x-months, or x-years away from having nuclear weapons? How is he supposed to evaluate that?

PORTER: Yeah, I think that can be immediately identified as propaganda just right off the bat. I mean, you don't have to posit any complicated background with regard to the origins of that sort of statement to see that it's really propaganda because it simply ignores well-known facts that constitute the overarching reality that Iran is nowhere near even the intention of going for nuclear weapons, let alone having the capability get an nuclear weapon in any short period of time. I have done a little background work on the Chinese with the weapons program going back into the 1970s, 1980s, and what is striking about that history is that when they made the decision to go for nuclear weapons, they were not able to basically go quickly into the process of uranium enrichment and then to the development and to the design of the bomb and so forth. It took them many years. It took several years to get to the point to where they were anywhere close to being able to have a nuclear weapon. So that is simply another indicator that I think is worth bearing in mind whenever you read that sort of statement, and I know they are pervasive in the U.S. and foreign news media, to keep in mind that the reality is that any country which was to make a decision, if it makes a decision that it wants to have a nuclear weapon, faces a plethora of very difficult decisions that have to be made and which take time in order to arrive at that final conclusion objective.

WOODS: Why, then, did they do it? Why did American politicians in particular feel like there was an urgency to find evidence of weapons of mass destruction, intentions, or capabilities when it didn't exist? What is the motivating factor here?

PORTER: Right, and here I think, you know, you find that each administration has its own combination of factors that have shaped the policy decisions towards Iran's nuclear program. If you go back to the Clinton Administration, one has to see that there is a huge overhang of Israeli influence of the policy of the United States under the Clinton Administration, not just towards Iran but towards the Middle East in general, and I really document that whole problem in great detail. So that's the Clinton Administration. Then you go to the Bush Administration, and you have a neoconservative cohort within the Administration which had its own strategy well before the administration took office and after 9/11 we have very concrete documentary evidence that the group at the Pentagon under Rumsfeld, of course, as the head of the Pentagon, but Paul Wolfowitz, and then Douglas Feith, had a strategy of converting that opportunity into regime change in five different Middle East countries beginning with Iraq, but with the Iran regime change being the ultimate objective, and it was for that reason that the neoconservatives were working with Israel to lay the groundwork in the form of a false intelligence file to lay the groundwork for a war against Iran.

So I think that's a very different situation than under the Clinton Administration. Then you go to the Obama Administration. I think the evidence weighs very heavily in favor of concluding that the national security officials, the national security team of the Obama Administration, really did buy into the entire false narrative that had been created over more than 10 years, particularly the narrative during the Bush Administration about the Iranian nuclear program. So I think that they were in basically the situation of self-deception,

essentially accepting what had been put forward by the Israelis and the neoconservatives without any effort to carefully evaluate the legitimacy of the evidence that they were given. And I make a point when I speak about this in public that I think the credibility of the false intelligence file that was created on the alleged covert Iranian nuclear weapons program has gained enormous momentum because of two factors. One, the IAEA gave it their blessing beginning, particularly in 2008 and then accelerating in 2011, in this whole series of critical reports, and the U.S. intelligence community gave it its credibility. It gave it a patina of credibility by its series of national intelligence assessments which essentially said that, yes, Iran has had a nuclear weapons program, or in 2001, 2005 does now have a nuclear weapons program. So I think those are the factors, in particular, the 2007 NIA had very great importance in giving this whole narrative enormous credibility and making it virtually impossible to unpack it to really have an opportunity to push back with regard to anyone in the news media or in political life.

WOODS: My understanding is that in 2004-2005 the Europeans managed to broker a deal with the Iranians that basically would have prevented them, would have eliminated their ability to create a nuclear weapon, and the U.S. opposed this. Am I misunderstanding that? And if they did, what's the deal?

PORTER: I would not put it so strongly as that. I would say that they did in fact start a negotiating process in 2003, accelerated in 2004, and in 2005, in the spring of 2005 the Iranians did propose a plan which would, as you have suggested quite correctly, have made it much, much more unlikely that they would be able to have any breakout capability at all. It would have forewarned, at least according to the outline of the plan, a breakout capability as we now understand it. That is the ability to have enough enriched uranium that you could, if you made the decision to go for a bomb, have it within a matter of months. This would not have happened under the Iranian proposal, and I quote in my book the U.K. representative to the [inaudible] was on the EU negotiating team at that meeting, and he says, that he recalls that we were all quite impressed by this, but he said, "I knew in my heart that we couldn't do anything about it," and of course, the reason was that everyone knew that they were forewarned by the United States government, by the Bush Administration, not to allow a single centrifuge to spin. So there was never any chance that that could happen.

WOODS: Is this part of a general pattern in what seems to be common tactics of U.S. diplomacy, whereby you make the most unreasonable demand you can to make sure the other side can't possibly accept it?

PORTER: Well, I think that there is a tendency toward that on the part of the United States in any situation where it's clear the U.S. has an overwhelming power advantage over the target country, over the country with which the United States is negotiating, and certainly I wrote a book on the U.S. entry in the war in Vietnam in which I point out that that was really overwhelmingly the dominant pattern of U.S. thinking. So yes, I think that that's a general problem. But I would say that specifically in the Bush Administration you have a particular set of circumstances where the neoconservatives in the administration were pushing not just for a favorable agreement or an agreement that the Iranians would not have accepted. They did not want any agreement at all, and that was very clear from the start. They did not want any agreement that would stand in the way of regime change. That was their ultimate goal.

WOODS: That's what I thought.

PORTER: So that's a very specific case that applied to the Bush Administration. I don't think it applies, in fact, I am quite sure it doesn't apply to the Obama Administration. I think their problem is back to the overall pattern of a dominant power, in this case, a power counting on its ability to manipulate the Iranians at the negotiating table because of the belief that the Iranians are so desperate because of sanctions—that the United States can really make very strong demands, and the Iranians would have to get in. I think that's a serious danger in the end, because in combination with the acceptance of this false narrative about how dangerous the Iranians are in terms of getting a breakout capability, and you know, we must constantly push back and prevent them from having any, basically, any enrichment capability beyond the most minimal. I think that's a reason why this administration could botch the nuclear negotiations with Iran.

WOODS: Since most Americans seem to have gone for the narrative that's been pushed on them by successive U.S. presidents and the compliant media, why do you think they were unsuccessful at getting their war against Iran? It seemed as if they had all their ducks in a row. Why did it never happen?

PORTER: That's a very important question, and the answer is very simple, I think. Well, no, there are two simple answers, I should say, not just one. The first simple answer is that the United States was unable to consolidate its material control over Iraq, which was always the basis on which it was assumed the Bush

Administration could then go on to further regime change policy escapades in the Middle East, including Iran. So the failure to be able to consolidate control over Iraq, I think, was crucial to the collapse of the plan for a war against Iran.

The second reason is that even in 2007, 2008, long after it became clear that the United States could not consolidate its control over Iraq, the Pentagon and the armed services of the United States were unanimous essentially in saying no to any war with Iran. It was simply not an acceptable use of military power for the Pentagon and Joint Chiefs of Staff. The reason is that it would be too costly, and the danger to American facilities and to American naval vessels in the Gulf, particularly those naval vessels going close to the mainland of Iran through the Strait of Hormuz, was simply too great for them to entertain the idea of a war against Iran. So I think there was sort of a double whammy, if you will, that eliminated the possibility of a war with Iran.

WOODS: What do you say when you're confronted with the very common neoconservative argument, according to which it may have been plausible to negotiate over nuclear weapons with the communists because they were atheistic materialists, and they wanted to hold onto life, you know, for dear life, but whereas here we're dealing with Muslims, and they are crazy. They know that when they die, they are going to paradise, so death is not a deterrent for them. We hear this all the time. Therefore, these critics would say, you can't possibly believe anything they say. You can't negotiate with them on nuclear weapons. They are going to get the nuclear weapons. They don't care, and also, not only can you not trust the negotiations but mutually assured destruction doesn't work because they don't care if they are destroyed.

PORTER: Well, of course, the first point, and I wish I had been in a situation where I had been able to have that kind of an argument with a neoconservative leaning individual. It just has never happened so far.

WOODS: Ah, too bad.

PORTER: Yeah, it's too bad, but if I did have the opportunity I would say this. First of all, the administration, the Obama Administration's intelligence people, clearly do not accept that. They reject it, and it's not just the United States intelligence that rejects that whole view of Iran, but it's also the Israeli intelligence despite the fact that as we know the Israelis always put forward the idea that Iran is an existential threat to Israel. The reality is that Israeli intelligence has never brought into that sort of absurd, cartoonish version of the nature of the Iranian government leadership. Beyond that, in my book I really documented a point that is simply not understood widely and really needs to be understood widely: that whatever else one might say about the so-called theocratic rule in Iran, and it is indeed theocratic rule in the sense that the Supreme Leader is given the power to make rulings based on his understanding of Islam and what is legitimate and what is not legitimate under Islam, and you know, despite the fact that that creates problems in any political system, it's bound to have a lot of, create a lot of difficulties for human rights and so forth, it does have one major advantage for the United States. And that is that not just the present Supreme Leader, but his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, have taken the position that weapons of mass destruction are illegitimate under Islam, and that Iran may not therefore possess, let alone use, any weapons of mass destruction. I document the fact that during the Iran/Iraq War, despite the fact that the Iranian military badly wanted to have the chemical weapons with which at least to deter the Iraqis from continuing their mass campaign of chemical-weapon attacks against Iran, the leadership of the regime, Ayatollah Khomeini, setting the outline of the policy, said no, there cannot be any Iranian chemical weapons. And they never did produce chemical weapons, although they did have the precursors and they made it public that they did have the precursors, and then of course, in the case of nuclear weapons, they have continued to take the same position.

Although, you know, there are other reasons for opposing nuclear weapons apart from Islam. The government's high officials have been making the case for the last 15 to 20 years that in fact, nuclear weapons would not be in Iran's interest for all kinds of national security reasons because they would cause severe problems for Iran with its neighbors, meaning its Islamic neighbors, its Sunni Arab regime neighbors on one hand, and because it would expose Iran to a much greater threat from the United States in particular if they did, in fact, go in that direction. So they made a very compelling case—which I must say I cannot point to another case where, or any case I should say, where a government has made such a strong case against nuclear weapons, and then has gone ahead and procured or manufactured its own nuclear weapons.

WOODS: Finally, you mentioned Israeli intelligence a few moments ago, and everybody has the view, more or less, that the Mossad is among the best intelligence agencies in the world. Now, my understanding is they

take a much, much less hysterical view of Iran than a lot of Israeli politicians might, in particular about the alleged Iranian nuclear program. Is that in fact the case? And if so, why wouldn't Israeli politicians be giving them high fives and cheering that in fact Iran is not the threat that they thought? Why would the politicians carry forward?

PORTER: First of all, the question of whether Mossad's position is indeed quite different from the public political position of both labor and Likud governments, the answer is yes, it has been indeed, but as I said earlier, Mossad has not bought into the idea that these are not deterrable leaders in Iran, quite the opposite, they regard them as very rational, and both Mossad and IDF leadership have said that publicly in recent years, by the way. I should also mention the former Minister of Defense of Israel under the present Likud government, Ehud Barak, has also said publicly that he would not argue that Iran has gotten, has had a nuclear weapons program because of Israel, and the reason for that is that he says they were more concerned about the Sunni Arab regimes than they were about Israel in the past, and that is indeed one of the hallmarks of Mossad's analysis of Iranian policy. So that's a critical point to bear in mind about Mossad's view.

The second question about why the politicians don't welcome that. I think there's a simple answer to that, and that is that ever since the early 1990s both Labor and Likud, the governments in Israel, have essentially used the idea of the Iranian nuclear threat alongside the more general sort of Iranian threat to support extremists, Islamicists in the region and in general and Israel in particular. They have used that idea of that threat for a whole plethora of political and diplomatic objectives, not the least of which has been to manipulate U.S. and other major power policies toward Iran. What they have wanted ideally, of course, is to get the United States to maneuver the United States into a position where it would threaten, at the very least, the Iranians with destruction of its nuclear program unless it's ceased and desisted in its uranium enrichment program. I think that's what they really wanted, the ultimate objective that they were hoping for. But short of that, they definitely wanted the U.S. and other powers to sign on to the most damaging set of sanctions against Iran that they could imagine, and that was of course the sanctions against the oil export sector of Iran, which is the mainstay of its economy and then its national budget. So in 2011-2012 I show in my book that that is really what Bibi Netanyahu is doing in his maneuvering to create this idea that he was considering an attack in Iran. He was really trying to maneuver the United States government in particular, the Obama Administration in particular, to if not take on the task of handing an ultimatum to Iran over its program, then at least to carry out these crippling sanctions, and in the latter, of course, he was quite successful.