

# US caught wiretapping UN atomic energy head ElBaradei

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Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has become the latest target of the Bush administration's diplomatic thuggery. An article in Sunday's *Washington Post* revealed that US intelligence has intercepted dozens of ElBaradei's phone calls, with Iranian diplomats in particular, in an effort to dig up embarrassing details that could be used to oust him.

Citing several US sources, the newspaper stated that "anonymous accusations against ElBaradei made by US officials in recent weeks are part of an orchestrated campaign. Some US officials accused ElBaradei of purposely concealing damning details of Iran's program from the IAEA board. But they offered no evidence of a cover-up. 'The plan is to keep the spotlight on ElBaradei and raise the heat,' another US official said."

The White House has made no secret of the fact that it is seeking to replace ElBaradei, who has been IAEA head since 1997, when his second term expires next year. As early as September, US Secretary of State Colin Powell called for the former Egyptian diplomat and lawyer to step down. Powell justified the demand on the flimsiest of pretexts, citing an informal "rule" that senior UN positions should be limited to two terms.

It is no mystery why Washington wants ElBaradei out. He has repeatedly questioned the Bush administration's fabrications about nuclear weapons in Iraq, as well as in Iran and North Korea. In the case of Iran, ElBaradei has refused to go along with unsubstantiated US allegations that Tehran has a secret nuclear weapons program. In the lead-up to last month's IAEA meeting, he produced a report concluding that "all nuclear material in Iran had been accounted for, and therefore such material is not diverted to prohibited activities".

By siding with European efforts to negotiate a deal with Tehran to freeze key aspects of its nuclear programs, ElBaradei helped frustrate US efforts to refer Iran to the UN Security Council and impose sanctions for alleged breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As in the case of Iraq, Washington is using alleged illicit nuclear weapons

activity as the pretext for destabilising the Tehran regime and preparing future military aggression. Iran is one of the countries, along with Iraq and North Korea, branded by Bush in 2002 as part of an "axis of evil".

ElBaradei has given no indication that he intends to bow to US pressure. He rebuffed Powell's invocation of the so-called two-term rule and has been nominated for a third term as IAEA director.

Various allegations have been circulated about ElBaradei, including claims that he colluded with Iranian officials and showed them confidential IAEA reports prior to their publication. ElBaradei has vigorously denied the accusations, declaring last week that the IAEA did not leak, discuss or negotiate its reports with anyone, especially a country subject to inspection. "At the end of the day, not a single paragraph is shown to any single country until the report is out," he said.

The most obvious source for such an accusation is the telephone intercepts. But, according to US officials who have seen phone transcripts, there is nothing that implicates ElBaradei. "Some people think he sounds way too soft on the Iranians, but that's about it," one official told the *Washington Post*. In comments in the US press, Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared: "So far, to the best of my knowledge, there's nothing that has indicated that ElBaradei has done anything untoward, illegal or inappropriate."

According to the *Washington Post*, the Bush administration has already sounded out possible replacements for ElBaradei, including two South Korean officials, a Brazilian disarmament expert, two Japanese diplomats and, topping the list, Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer. The *Australian Financial Review* noted yesterday that Downer was rumoured in the US media as a possible replacement for ElBaradei several months ago. "John Bolton, the under secretary of state for arms control and international security—and one of the [US] administration's fiercest hawks—has been quietly pushing Mr Downer's candidacy behind the scenes," the newspaper

stated.

Downer reportedly turned down the offer at the time and, after a delay, issued a statement yesterday ruling out a challenge to ElBaradei. His comments do not, however, explain his rather sudden interest in issues related to nuclear arms—an area in which he has no previous experience or expertise. In August, he unexpectedly undertook a trip to Pyongyang to try to convince North Korean leaders to resume six-nation talks on its nuclear programs—negotiations to which Australia is not a party. Last month, he assumed centre stage at an Asia-Pacific non-proliferation conference in Sydney, which ElBaradei attended as his guest.

Downer's only real qualification as US nominee for the IAEA post is his ability to parrot Washington's political line. The Australian government wholeheartedly embraced the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and its doctrine of "pre-emptive war," and dispatched troops for the US-led invasion. As its foreign affairs spokesman, Downer repeated verbatim every lie about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Since then, he has sought to demonstrate the Howard government's unswerving loyalty to Washington in order to secure US backing for Australian ambitions in the Asia Pacific region.

Downer's record stands in contrast to that of ElBaradei, who, prior to the US invasion, scotched US claims that Iraq was secretly developing nuclear weapons. He exposed as crude forgeries, documents purporting to show that Iraq had attempted to buy uranium ore from Niger. In a report to the UN Security Council delivered in March 2003, ElBaradei declared that there was "no indication of resumed nuclear activities... nor any indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities at any inspected sites".

Along with those of Hans Blix, the executive chairman of UNMOVIC, the UN weapons inspections unit that scoured Iraq from late November 2002, ElBaradei's reports constituted a damning refutation, virtually point by point, of the catalogue of lies presented by Powell to the UN Security Council in February 2003 to justify military invasion. Their evidence played a significant role in the ultimate refusal of the body to give its seal of approval to the US attack.

ElBaradei has continued to be a thorn in Washington's side. Immediately prior to the November US election, he made several disclosures that were politically damaging to Bush. In a letter to the UN Security Council on October 1, he revealed evidence that there had been "widespread and apparently systematic dismantlement" of so-called dual-use equipment and facilities in Iraq that had previously been monitored by the IAEA to ensure they were not used for nuclear programs, and that neither the US nor the Iraqi government could account for the missing materials. On October 25, he exposed the fact that 400 tonnes of high

explosives—potentially usable in detonators for nuclear weapons—had gone missing following the US invasion.

The failure of US occupation forces to secure these stockpiles and prevent them falling into the hands of potential terrorists underscored the fact that Iraq's alleged "weapons of mass destruction" were an excuse for an invasion carried out to further Washington's economic and strategic objectives in Iraq and the Middle East. In the aftermath of the US election, the Bush administration has shown every sign that it will adopt a more, rather than less, aggressive stance, particularly toward Iran and North Korea.

The publication of the *Washington Post* article is one more indication of ongoing, intense conflicts within the intelligence, foreign policy and military establishments in the US. It was based on leaks from US officials within the government or state apparatus who had access to the highly classified information and were clearly out to embarrass those within the White House pushing the campaign against ElBaradei. What lies at the heart of these disputes are not fundamental differences of principle, but tactical concerns over the dangers posed by the Bush administration's unilateralist and bellicose foreign policy.

Washington is, however, unlikely to halt its efforts to oust ElBaradei, including by means that are patently in breach of international law. The revelations of US spying on a top UN official once again underscore the gangster methods of the Bush administration. While continually claiming to act in the name of peace, freedom and democracy, its stock-in-trade is secrecy, lies, bullying and provocation as it aggressively pursues its plans for dominance over its international rivals.



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