Leaked cables show Australian intelligence discounted Iranian threat

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Leaked diplomatic cables sent to Washington by the US embassy in Canberra reveal that Australian intelligence agencies gave little credence in 2008 and 2009 to claims that Iran's nuclear program represented a threat to other states in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. The Australian Labor Party government, however, provided full public and private backing to the US and Israeli campaign against Tehran, despite warnings from intelligence sources that it could result in a catastrophic war.

Edited extracts of Australian-sourced cables are being published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age*, which obtained them last month from WikiLeaks.

In July 2008, the US embassy reported that Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had conveyed that he was "deeply worried" that diplomatic talks would fail to pressure the Iranian government to agree to suspend uranium enrichment at its civilian nuclear facilities. Israel, Rudd opined, "may be forced to use 'non-diplomatic means'".

The very use of the term "forced" points to Rudd's alignment with the pretext that an Israeli or US attack on Iran would be justified because Tehran was seeking nuclear weapons. This is despite the fact that a US National Intelligence Estimate in December 2007 had concluded no such weapons program existed.

The same month, July 2008, the US embassy reported in another cable that the Israeli ambassador to Australia, Yuval Rotem, had told his American counterparts that Rudd had "gone out of his way to stress his strong commitment to Israel and his appreciation of its security concerns". In discussions with Rotem, Rudd had labelled Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "a loathsome individual at every level".

The cable noted that Rudd, while in opposition during 2007, had demagogically called for the International Criminal Court to prosecute Ahmadinejad over his alleged calls for the destruction of the state of Israel. Rotem told the US that he believed Rudd was "firm in his desire to do whatever possible to signal Australia's opposition to Tehran's nuclear ambitions" and was "very firm in his support for Israel".

In October 2008, the Rudd government announced increased economic sanctions against Iran, in line with US actions to dramatically increase pressure on Tehran. In late 2008, an Australian frigate, which had been deployed in the Persian Gulf, participated in American naval exercises that were ever more explicitly rehearsals for war.

The US cables indicate that Australian intelligence agencies responded with alarm to the increasingly volatile situation in the Middle East and gave advice to Rudd that was contrary to both the US and Australian government's stance.

The most important cable leaked by the *Sydney Morning Herald* is a dispatch to Washington in December 2008. It reported that the Office of National Assessments (ONA), the coordinating intelligence agency that directly advises Australian prime ministers, told the Australian government that it was "a mistake to think about Iran as a 'rogue state'".

ONA head Peter Varghese also made clear to his US counterparts that while his agency did believe Iran was seeking nuclear weapon capabilities, Tehran's actions had to be understood as defensive in nature. "ONA," the US embassy wrote, "viewed Tehran's nuclear program within the paradigm of the 'laws of deterrence,' noting that Iran's ability to produce a weapon may be 'enough' to meet its security objectives".

ONA analysts also conveyed to US intelligence the conclusion that "a 'mixture of hubris and paranoia' pervades Iranian attitudes that in turn shape Tehran's threat perceptions and policies".

The context in which ONA assessed Iran's desire for "deterrence" and "threat perceptions" consisted of years of sanctions and warnings of military action against Tehran by both the US and Israel.

In January 2002, Tehran had been labelled by President George Bush as part of an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union speech. The US had laid waste to Iraq, on Iran's western border, and hunted down and executed the top leaders of the Iraqi Baathist regime. Iran had been accused of aiding Iraqi resistance to the US occupation. Bush and other US leaders had repeatedly stated that "all options" were on the table to stop the country's nuclear program.

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In late 2008, US warships were massed in the Persian Gulf off Iran's coast and plans were being drawn up to send tens of thousands of additional American troops to the war in Afghanistan, to Iran's east.

The ONA's main fear in December 2008 was not an act of aggression by Iran, but that Tehran's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent was in fact providing the pretext for the most militarist elements in Israel to justify launching war. It raised concerns with the US that the Israeli military was preparing a "strike against Iranian nuclear facilities".

Israel possesses an arsenal of over 200 nuclear weapons. In July 2006, it had launched a brutal invasion of south Lebanon in an attempt to destroy the pro-Iranian Hezbollah nationalist movement. In September 2007, it had bombed an alleged nuclear facility in Syria. In June 2008, Israeli jets were exposed carrying out large-scale rehearsals in the Mediterranean Sea for an attack on Iranian facilities.

The ONA advised that, instead of threats of military force, the best solution would be to offer Tehran a security guarantee through a "strategic relationship with the US via some 'grand bargain'". The Iranian regime would be open to a deal because its anti-US statements were "rhetoric" which had "fairly shallow roots".

In March 2009, the US embassy reported that Australian intelligence officials expressed fears that "Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities would lead to a conventional war—or even a nuclear exchange—in the Middle East involving the US, which would draw Australia into a conflict". The "leading concerns" of Australian intelligence analysts were again focussed not on Iran, but on preventing "Israel from independently launching uncoordinated military strikes".

The cable also revealed the anxiety of Australian intelligence agencies over the prospect of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) collapsing in the face of what they saw as Iran's attempts to deter US and Israeli aggression by acquiring nuclear weapons. Australian representatives told US officials that the conflict could drive "south east Asian states… to pursue their own nuclear capabilities, which could introduce a direct threat to the Australian homeland".

The Labor government did not inform the Australian population that its own intelligence agencies believed Iran's nuclear program was a defensive reaction to the US and Israel. Nor did it reveal that the intelligence agencies were, at the least, critical of the US for not doing more to make a deal with Iran, and that they feared Israel would start a war in which Australia would become involved.

Instead, the government aligned Australia with the confrontational US policy toward Iran, continued to pledge full support to Israel, and diplomatically backed both Washington and Tel Aviv on the international arena.

The cables reveal the degree to which US policy determines the stance of the Australian government. To the extent that the dominant sections of the Australian ruling class still view the US alliance as indispensable to asserting their imperialist economic and strategic influence in the South Pacific and South East Asia, there is no line Canberra will not cross.

As was the case with the conservative Howard government in 2002 and 2003, during the build up to the invasion of Iraq, the Labor Party was clearly prepared to ignore Australian intelligence agencies and participate in an illegal war of aggression against Iran, justified with half-truths and outright lies.

Nothing of any substance has changed in Australian policy since. The Labor government headed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard remains no less willing to back Israel and the US if they unleash war on Iran.

The cables also cast light on the extent to which unquestioned support for Israel has shaped Australian foreign policy decisions, primarily because the pro-Israeli Zionist lobby in Washington exerts great influence within the American political establishment.

The most obscene example was provided by Gillard, who was acting prime minister in January 2009 during the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Hamas movement. As hundreds of Palestinian civilians were being killed by Israeli air and ground bombardments, Gillard repeatedly denounced the "aggression" of Hamas and declared that "we [the Labor government] recognise Israel's right to defend itself".

In a cable sent that month, the US embassy reported that the Israeli ambassador Rotem had expressed his delight that Gillard had been "very understanding of Israel's military action" and "far more supportive than they had expected". Rotem let Washington know that Israel was "very satisfied" with Gillard's and the Labor government's endorsement of what amounted to war crimes.

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