



**CENTER FOR NATIONAL POLICY**

**“IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM:  
REFLECTIONS FROM NUCLEAR TOURISTS”**

**FEATURED SPEAKERS:**

**SHARON WEINBERGER, AUTHOR OF *IMAGINARY  
WEAPONS: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE PENTAGON'S  
SCIENTIFIC UNDERWORLD,***

**NATHAN HODGE,  
*JANE'S DEFENCE WEEKLY***

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MR. SCOTT BATES: Well, thank you very much for coming to the Center for National Policy. Those of you in the back, can you hear me all right? Okay, thank you very much. We're going to be renovating very soon and you'll have better seats in the future. Trust me about that.

On behalf of our president here at Center for National Policy, Tim Roemer, and our chairman, Peter Kovler, thank you for coming here today. Mr. Roemer's on travel in Europe with a congressional committee. My name's Scott Bates. I'm vice president of the Center for National Policy.

Today, we have a very interesting program for you indeed. In 2006, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made an unusual offer. He promised to open up Iran's key nuclear sites to foreigners, journalists, and tourists. And Sharon Weinberger and Nathan Hodge, to my left and right respectively, defense reporters and authors of a new book right here, "A Nuclear Family Vacation" – you're getting that over there, the camera? Very good. They took him up on his offer and they traveled to Iran in February 2007 to tour Iran's Isfahan uranium conversion facility and they met with Iranian officials.

Today, they'll discuss their conversations with Iranian think-tankers, politicians, and scientists involved in the country's nuclear program. And they'll describe what they saw and what they talked with people about. The authors will also discuss more recent developments such as the release of official photos from inside the Natanz uranium enrichment plant and Iran's gestures toward transparency.

I should also mention – I don't know if any of you have read the *New York Times* website in the last few hours, but it seems that the Axis of Evil is down to one now, because North Korea is now not a terrorist state. Congratulations to the Bush administration. (Laughter.) And so there's just one left; that would be Iran. So that is the topic of our discussion today.

Without further ado, I will turn it over to my distinguished colleagues here – and who would like to go first? Have you worked that out?

MS. SHARON WEINBERGER: We've worked that out.

MR. BATES: Okay, all about marital harmony here.

MS. WEINBERGER: Yeah, so – not mentioned before Nathan and I married, and that's the title of the book "A Nuclear Family Vacation: Travels in the World of Atomic Weaponry," which is somewhat a whimsical way of approaching what was for us a serious subject, which was the U.S. nuclear stockpile, the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, and then as well as foreign nuclear complexes as well.

So I want to talk a little bit about the book and how Iran came in to that and how we ended up there, and it was very much – sorry, I’ll move this – in 2006, when this announcement was made – this very unusual announcement, you know, we’re going to open our sites to Americans, to tourists, to journalists, and you can visit this. And there were sort of some jokes in articles about, you know, what to take on your nuclear vacation to Iran and what you can see. Now, there were some sort of specifics that were lacking. They didn’t really say how an American would take this vacation.

And as luck would have it, we were working on this book, which was nuclear vacationing, but more seriously visits to nuclear sites. And we were focusing mostly on the U.S. complex, visiting the nuclear labs out west, visiting the Nevada test site. We visited part of the production complex at Y-12 in the United States in Tennessee. We visited some missile silos out in the Great Plains. We visited Strategic Command, which controls some nuclear arsenal. And we had wanted to visit, of course – and we did this at Russia to look at their nuclear issues and nonproliferation programs the U.S. was supporting, but we wanted, you know – we weren’t going to traverse the whole world, but we want an example of a nuclear proliferation concern. And originally we thought about visiting India and Pakistan. And in the end when the opportunity in 2006 seemed to appear to visit Iran, we thought, well, this is actually a more interesting issue. India, Pakistan – we might speak with some government people, we can’t really visit much. But here was Iran really promising to open up.

Nathan separately had been trying for two years to get a journalist visa to Iran to report on other issues, but since being labeled as part of the Axis of Evil, Iran was not really handing out that many journalist visas. But, you know, 2006, we decide to try again. So we went to the Iranian representative to the U.N. in New York and explained what we were doing and, you know, he listened politely and said, well, you know, I think this is possible and then that was the end of it. We never heard back. You know, we would call every few weeks and, you know, he’d politely say it’s in process.

And we finally were told there were agencies in Tehran that were authorized to work with journalists and so we called one of these agencies and said what we were doing. And they were like, well, you know, we’ll see. And then sort of – it was probably in late January, we got a call – maybe it was early February, we got a call on a Monday, saying can you be in Tehran on Saturday? We’re going to let you – they’re going to let people into the Isfahan uranium conversion facility, and we’re like, well, we think we can be there and we were looking tickets, and they promised the visas would be taken care of, which we’ve been trying to do for two years, so we were a little dubious.

And we finally got our visas about two and a half-some hours before the last flight was going to take off to get us there. We went to the consulate in the Iranian – I’m sorry, the interests section in Georgetown to plead our case – and we were already getting a sense of, you know, the Iranian government does not always speak with one voice. Well, I guess their – (unintelligible) – the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, which was organizing the tour, sent your names on the list. We have that. But the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs hasn't approved it. And Nathan pleaded – (unintelligible) – you know, they made some calls and, you know, finally they came back and said, you know – we were looking at the clock and said, you know, we're giving you your visas, stay with the group. And we were off.

And we really didn't know what we were going to get access to or what to expect. We'd simply been told that they were going to organize a select – a tour for a select group at Isfahan, of the uranium conversion facility. So we get to Tehran and the small group had expanded into maybe some hundred or so –

MR. NATHAN HODGE: Couple dozen.

MS. WEINBERGER: – yes – journalists, really very few Americans. There were ourselves – meaning Nathan and myself – and then there was a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, and Christiane Amanpour from CNN had actually been granted a visa as well, was on the tour. And then there were ambassadors of nonaligned countries – Cuba, Syria, and the like – on this tour. And we were told at the time that they were opening up the uranium conversion facility at Isfahan and that there would be movement within possibly a week or a few days to visit Natanz.

And just for clarification, I'm not going to kind of go into all the specifics. Isfahan is where they convert yellowcake into uranium hexafluoride. Natanz, which was really the center of political controversy at the time, is where it's enriched.

So on one hand, it was important that they were letting people into Isfahan, but Natanz was sort of more important. So they were saying, you know, they had promised to open up everything. You know, that was their promise, but for the time being, it was Isfahan. So we were taken on, I think it was a two-day tour – a one-day tour of the plant itself. And you know, we both – I hesitate to call it a dog and pony show. I think other people would call it that, because any time you visit anyone's nuclear site – and this is true in the United States, it's true in Russia, it's true in Kazakhstan – it is a dog and pony show. They're showing you what they want you to see. They're pointing out the things that they want you to point out.

Certainly, it was a little bit disturbing that at a time when all of the issues were going on at Natanz, they were highlighting Isfahan. And so inevitably news people report what they see, so they're getting all these pictures of openness at Isfahan. Well, what about Natanz? I'll come back to that.

You know, so we had our tour. (Unintelligible) – IAEA cameras. Here's the yellowcake and here's how we track everything and how we can't divert anything. And then they made sure that we got enforced a day tour of the city of Isfahan, which is a beautiful, beautiful, wonderful culturally rich city. But there again was a point to it, which is if you bomb the plant, you're going to be bombing an historic city and that would be really awful. It is a beautiful city.

Back in Tehran, we had meetings with a number of people: with a top parliamentary official who was involved in negotiations, with an independent think-tank, with an association that represented survivors of chemical weapons attacks from the Iran-Iraq war, and then probably most intriguingly and I think Nathan will go into it, we were introduced to someone who is – I think they were presented to us as the head of the Nuclear Club, which was – it was an academic association that worked with students and engineers who were working on nuclear issues, nuclear energy issues.

And though our – all of the meetings in Tehran were arranged by this agency, which was authorized to work with journalists – so you know, when I compare it to other places we've visited – you know, how much was it controlled? You know, we made requests of who we wanted to see, the types of things we wanted to see, and the agency would come back and say which interviews they could set up. So it was not government control, but it was certainly one step removed.

What didn't happen and what we weren't able to see were other nuclear sites. The issue came up at the press conference at the Isfahan uranium conversion facility, well, what about Natanz? And, you know, they said, oh, that would be open – the president has promised that all places are open. Well, okay, when can we visit it? And that never came up and when we were there, they kept saying, you know, within a few days, within a week it will be open. Well, that was February, 2007, it's now – where are we? We're, you know, well over a year later, so a year and a half later and that to journalists, to a similar group, that has not yet been opened. So you can take that for what it is.

And I think it's important and I think it's important to know what you can see as well as what you can't see. You know, what were sort of interesting things that struck out? We are not – you know, you're going to a place and being shown what they want to show and even the nonaligned ambassadors were saying, we're not nuclear experts, we can't sit here and divine your nuclear secrets. But, you know, it's interesting to see what's important for a country.

I think one of the things that was striking for us was security at Isfahan, which is – there really wasn't any (primary?) security, when – you know, compared to visiting nuclear sites in the United States, where particularly after 9/11 so many measures have been taken to step up security, perimeter security – (unintelligible) – you know, what they're worried about there is they had anti-aircraft guns. Obviously, their primary concern was attack from the sky. They're not really concerned about anyone infiltrating the facility itself.

What was going on at the time is, of course, you know, this was in early 2007, 2006 was – you know, there was a lot going on between Iran and United States on nuclear issues. There had been a series of provocative articles in the *New Yorker* saying that the U.S. was preparing for airstrikes. So quite naturally most of the questions that were directed at us were about airstrikes. Do you think there are going to be airstrikes? What did they think about airstrikes? I think Nathan will go into more details about this.

There had been demands to Iran at the time to halt their uranium enrichment, which they had refused to do and was pointed out many times to us when we were there that they were not going to halt. And so there were sanctions that were imposed and a lot of back and forth between the U.S., Iran, and the United Nations.

One of the other things that was striking to us on just sort of the atmosphere before Nathan goes into details, was when I compare our visit to Iran to perhaps Russia, where we visited and foreign journalists are not allowed into their nuclear cities, we had a lot of problems setting up interviews with nuclear weapon scientists and in general it was a very unwelcome atmosphere. You know, compared to that on a very, very social level, you know, everywhere from the airport, from, you know, border guards to security – the places where governments that don't want you usually harass you – there was really a lot of enthusiasm to see Americans. There are some Americans who travel as tourists to Iran. We were probably the first nuclear tourists.

But there was generally – and again, this is limited to Tehran, I'm not speaking about the rest of the country, but among people who are, you know, our age, similar age, older, there was generally just a great deal of happiness to see Americans there. There's a desire there. There's a lot of frustration with their own government that they are cut off from the world and I think there's a real feeling about it.

And one of the things we asked not related to nuclear issues was we asked our guide to take us to the former U.S. embassy because from our childhood, that is such an important and seminal thing. I think for the American public that will continue to be until some of those issues are resolved. And, you know, our tour guide was very embarrassed by this, like, oh, you don't want to go there. Why would you want to go there? I mean, this is historically important and he didn't want to take us there because it's an embarrassment for a lot of particularly educated Iranians where, you know, all of the American – anti-American propaganda is still there: the down with America, you know, the Statue of Liberty sort of dressed up as the devil. And that's, you know, it is one of those – it's a monument to anti-Americanism and that was embarrassing for people who would like to see better relations.

I'm now going to turn it over to Nathan to actually talk about specifics: what did people tell us, what was the significance of a particular nuclear issue.

MR. HODGE: Thanks. I'll just start with a really quick disclaimer that when I traveled to Iran, I didn't go on behalf of *Jane's*. This was very much a vacation.

Before I do that I want to fast-forward as well to sort of bring you up to speed on what's happened since last February when we visited. And since then we've seen seven IAEA board reports. The agency has conducted I think, when I last checked, about 14 unannounced inspections and we've seen several U.N. Security Council resolutions. But long story short, Iran has continued to defy the Security Council's call for it to cease all enrichment activities.

And in fact, the IAEA concluded the very month that we visited that Iran had, in fact, accelerated its enrichment activities instead of complying with the December '07 ultimatum to cease all activities or face further sanction. And that report detailed a number of things, including the continued construction of the heavy water reactor at Iraq, transport of feedstock in Natanz and the plant expansion of centrifuges at Natanz which is what Sharon was talking about.

And the most recent report which was issued, I think, in late May says that the Iranians produced around 320 tons of UF-6 at Isfahan – (unintelligible) – IAEA containment surveillance.

So I would really – there's a really good quote from March, 2007, shortly after we left, when Mohammed ElBaradei put it quite succinctly at a board member meeting. He said despite the more than four years spent trying to monitor Iran's nuclear ambitions, the IAEA was, quote, "unable to provide the required assurance about the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program."

So that last March, the Security Council followed with another resolution which reaffirmed the call for Iran to cease enrichment and reprocessing activities, and interestingly for us an annex included the names of entities and individuals involved in nuclear or ballistic missile activities, including a gentleman named Fereidoon Abbasi Davani, who was named in Security Council resolution 1747 as a senior Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces logistics scientist with links to the Institute of Applied Physics. Now, his day job when we were introduced to him was that he was basically the dean of students at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran – sort of a student affairs administrator. And he was the, I think, at the time the secretary of the Nuclear Club –

MS. WEINBERGER: Right, secretary.

MR. HODGE: – of the Nuclear Club of Iran, which was presented to us as, you know, purely kind of a club for people who had a general academic interest in nuclear topics. So by April of last year, Iran had boasted that it had achieved uranium enrichment with just 3,000 centrifuges and Ahmadinejad had boasted publicly that Iran was now capable of enriching nuclear fuel on an industrial scale, and this was the milestone on the step towards the ultimate goal, which is to establish (54,000 ?) centrifuges within the Natanz facility.

So over the course of last year after took our vacation in Iran, this confrontation with the United States continued and last October the administration announced these new sanctions on Iranian banks and individuals, including senior Revolutionary Guards Corps officials, and in parallel we saw a lot more – for instance, in our reporting, more allegations directed towards Iran by, for instance, coalition commanders in Iraq saying that Iran was providing expertise, particularly in know-how and delivering things like particularly illegal kinds of improvised explosive device, what we call explosively

formed penetrators and other assistance to Shi'a militias. So definitely tensions continued to ratchet up.

It would probably also worth a really brief aside about what was going on at the same time in Tehran because the domestic political scene there was changing as well. Last October, Ali Larijani resigned as Iran's top nuclear negotiator, reportedly over differences with Ahmadinejad and more recently he was elected as the speaker of the Iranian parliament, which some observers see as a sign of a political shift. I think the *Times* described Larijani as, quote, "more pragmatic in his approach" and perhaps willing to engage in diplomacy with the West.

But, you know, we should caveat any of these kinds of observations by saying there's a kind of a Kremlinology at work here. We're sort of trying to divine the intentions of the Iranian leadership with really very little firsthand information about domestic politics there. And it would also be important not to overstate too much the importance of Ahmadinejad or parliamentarians. After all, you know, the real decision-maker in Iran is still Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the Supreme religious leader, and the Guardians Council of Clerics and Jurists still have veto power over legislation. So a lot of the reporting has focused on, you know, Ahmadinejad's public pronouncements, but I think that it's important to say that, you know, the political system there is a little bit more complicated.

And perhaps the biggest development over here in Washington has been the National Intelligence Estimate, which came out last fall. And the NIE judged with high confidence that Iran had suspended its weapons program in the fall of '03. And we could have a separate discussion about some of the fallout from the NIE. It was pretty interesting, pretty heated here. But the most interesting thing that we've experienced in the past few months is we took a trip to Israel in February and some of the discussions that we had about the Israeli response to the NIE were really quite eye-opening. For instance, it was Brig. Gen. Yossi Kuperwasser, he's head of military intelligence research for the Israeli military. He was quite outspoken and he said basically he considered the NIE to have been a stab in the back. He also described it as one of the worst intelligence papers ever written, and that Israel was quite alone. And he also claimed that the Americans had evidence, but weren't sharing it with the rest of the world that Iran did continue to pursue a weapons program.

So let's scroll forward to around last September, I think, when the Israeli air force staged a raid inside Syria. The target was a site near the Euphrates River, also described as the suspected reactor. Although the site was subsequently bulldozed, the administration later released some intelligence that seemed to suggest that the external appearance of this looked a lot like the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon. That presentation's online. It's definitely worth checking out.

And more recently, we've seen press reports describing some Israeli military exercises which have been described as a dress rehearsal for a strike or a possible strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. So that comes to the question of probably today that we're

all most interested in: What did Iranians say about the consequences of a strike? As Sharon mentioned during our visit, really a lot of concern on the Iranian side was about whether or not the United States would strike. And today, it seems to me Israel is speculated as preparing for one.

So we brought this up with, for instance, Rahman Ghahremanpour of the Center for Strategic Research and this is a think-tank affiliated with the ex-President Hashemi Rafsanjani. And he had a couple of interesting quotes and you could read them as you like, but they read very much like a slightly veiled threat. Basically he said the oil transport in the Gulf may be deteriorated by any airstrike. That was clearly a pretty serious consequence. And he also said that the nuclear technology activities are distributed within Iran. If you want to destroy our technology totally, you need to attack all of our cities in Bandar Abbas, and Behsahr, Kamyaran, Isfahan, Natanz and so on and so forth.

In other words he was saying by destroying Iranian nuclear activity is impossible. It might delay the speed of Iran's nuclear advancement, but an airstrike would also, in his argument, justify Iran's withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty because according to the Iranian argument, if the supreme interest of their country are threatened or their sovereignty is threatened because of being a member of the NPT, that member can withdraw. And so no NPT, no IAEA oversight, nothing.

We also spoke with Alizi Burazherdi (ph) who was the head of – (unintelligible) – Foreign Affairs Committee. And he put it more bluntly and I put the question to him: the U.S. has made threatening gestures and the aircraft carriers to the Gulf – and he very quickly stopped me in English, switched from Farsi, and said, which Gulf? Persian Gulf, of course. (Laughter.) If there were strikes, we asked, could you rebuild? What would happen? And he said basically – paraphrasing what he said was that nuclear knowledge is not bombardable and would only lead to a worsening of the situation.

So do these trips really reveal anything? I think Sharon kind of raised the question is this really a dog and pony show? Did we really get to see anything beyond – you know, we didn't go of course – we went with open eyes and with the expectations that we wouldn't be able to sort of divine the secret intentions of Iran's nuclear program. But we think that our travels really kind of affirmed the value of, you know, open source reporting or journalism, pure and simple.

Look at the National Intelligence Estimate. Among the open source material that was included in the estimate were two pieces of video from 2005. I think one was news file of former President Mohammed Khatami visiting the enrichment facility in Natanz and another was an Iranian government video. So although officials say that neither was critical to the overall assessment of the program, they did help assess a little bit the – gauge the progress of the enrichment program in Iran.

More recently, we've seen some really fascinating kind of photo dump from Natanz. It was back in April, I think, that Ahmadinejad paid a visit to Natanz and if you

go to president.ir online, you can see an entire fascinating photo dump of several dozen pictures that were taken during the course of his visit. And really this was a treasure trove, I think, for people who are interested in what's coming on inside of Iran's nuclear program.

Jeffrey Lewis, our favorite arms control expert, I think described them as quite remarkable. He said that experts were gleaning some important information from the pictures. They gave the public the first – they gave us the first public glimpse of the new centrifuge design the, IR-2, and there were no captions for the photos, but analysts have been – around the globe have been scrutinizing these pictures. They kind of like to give it a sort – (unintelligible) – sourcing and they're nuclear nonproliferation. Basically lots of people coming together examining the photos and trying to really assess, you know, how far along the Iranians are, and I think the *New York Times* had a great quote that it was “intel to die for.”

So I'd leave it at that and if you've guys have any questions, we'd be happy to take them.

MR. BATES: Thank you very much. First, I'll have the first question. That's the perk that I get by being up here. I like your reaction as defense analyst. You were on-the-ground observers which is invaluable, but Nathan works for *Jane's Defense Weekly* and Sharon is an editor at *Wired*, the national security editor.

So tapping into that vein of your background, if you can give me some comments on two things. One, I just read some remarks by Speaker Larijani that were issued I think today, in which he said in reaction to a question: What would happen if there were actions taken against Iran's nuclear program? He said that it would be a done deal. I think we can infer from that what that might mean, but he's saying that a reaction would be very quick and something would be a done deal. I believe he was referring to their nuclear program, if there were strong actions taken.

And then Mohammed ElBaradei was in an interview recently, I think in the European newspaper – I can't recall – but he said that if international inspectors were removed from Iran entirely that there might be able to weaponize from between six months to one year. So putting these pieces together, that seems to paint a picture that says at least the Iranians want to project the idea that they might be able to weaponize their program fairly quickly. Is that the impression you got when you were over there and what do you – were they trying to convey that to you? And knowing other sources in the intelligence community, what are you picking up about this kinds of situation?

MR. HODGE: First of all, everyone was really emphatic when we spoke to them that this was peaceful. There was really no discussion of weaponization, how quickly it could be done, that kind of line of questioning never really for us went anywhere. But we've seen that, and also if you look what seems to quote it in the NIE is that, yes, they ceased the weaponization back in 2003, but if you read the NIE closely, it will also say, you know, well, we also judge with some degree of certainty that were they willing to go

forward and begin weaponizing, they'd be able to do it in a reasonably compact period of time.

MS. WEINBERGER: There are two things I'd add. At the time that we visited, ISIS that was putting out reports on some of the problems they have with the centrifuges, that basically the report's going on that like, well, there are centrifuges, they're having problems, there was some contamination, some breakdowns, and if anything they were arguing, like, no, no, it's all working great. You know, I didn't think, you know, that stuff's leaked. So on one hand, they want to show that, yes, we're making all this great progress, but they're also – some think tanks and analysts saying, like, you know, they're having some problems.

So the question of how quick they could weaponize, you know, really there are some issues there, but beyond that the one threat that they have – and I haven't seen those remarks, but I think perhaps what they're alluding to is saying, well – their argument was, you know, we have – you know, we're abiding by the Nonproliferation Treaty. There are inspectors here. We're doing our part, but the one leverage we have is if we're bombed – they didn't say they would pull out, but they basically came very close saying, you bomb us, well, why should we be part of this treaty? So that was certainly – not that they were threatening to develop nuclear weapons, but threatening to pull out of a treaty.

You know, certainly I'm not – you know, I'm not into reading tea leaves. I think that, you know, whether it's an NIE, whether it's open or closed source intelligence, there's limits to what you can know, and it's always possible to do things in secret and so it's hard to come to definitive conclusions. Certainly, there is – what I do believe is that there's not – there's public support, they have drummed up a lot of public support for the nuclear program, you know, you see the big sign “nuclear energy is our right.” There were shows all over TV.

But at the same time, there's also a deep-seated public dislike, a lot of it dating back from the Iran-Iraq war and chemical weapons, that weapons of mass destruction are bad. So that's not to say that there isn't some secret nuclear program, but when you look at what is their public support for – a lot of support for nuclear energy, I don't know if there have been opinion polls, but I would suspect there're probably not a lot of support within the Iranian public for a nuclear weapons program. Could that all change if there were airstrikes? Possibly. I don't know. Probably there'll be some good public polls one could do to look at that issue.

MR. BATES: Okay. Well, thank you.

(END)