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Media Matters' Faulty Report on Broadcast Media

Media Matters for America has [published a misleading report](#) on whether the broadcast news networks misrepresent intelligence on Iranian nuclear issues. The methodology used in the report is flawed and highly biased. It is so defective that it appears designed to reach a pre-determined conclusion sought by Media Matters.

Media Matters is using a methodology that results in false comparisons between debates over the nuclear programs of Iraq and Iran. (Its statement of its methodology is reprinted at the end of this report.) Overall, the media coverage of Iran's nuclear program has been far better than the early 2000s coverage of whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Certainly, everyone should be careful and skeptical of claims of nuclear weapons efforts by any country. That is a central lesson of the Iraq WMD fiasco. Yet simplistic comparisons between Iraq and Iran do not serve the public interest but instead stifle important debate about the Iranian nuclear issue.

Media Matters does not seem to challenge that Iran had a nuclear weapons program prior to 2004. They also seem to accept that Iran is technically capable of building a crude nuclear weapon in one year, as Secretary of Defense Panetta has stated. But they are misstating, or are unable to understand the technical situation, by claiming that any estimate of Iran being less than a year away from a nuclear weapon is misrepresenting the facts. Twelve months is ok but eleven is not. What about nine or ten months? If they used three or six months as a criteria, they would be more accurate according to assessments by governments and independent experts, as long as they made it clear they were discussing the current situation. One year might be realistic now but it could take Iran a much shorter period of time to build a crude nuclear explosive in a few years if it continues developing its nuclear capabilities as planned.

Media Matters also coded as misrepresenting the facts "segments that speculated on the consequences if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons." Speculation about what would happen if Iran restarted a nuclear weapons program is a key question of the day, and it is not a misrepresentation if it is mentioned in a media report. The authors appear to accept that Iran had a bomb program before 2004. Nonetheless, this report glosses over the central concern that the international community has regarding Iran's nuclear program: that there is considerable evidence that Iran had a military nuclear program at least until the early 2000s and possibly has continued some of those activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is also concerned that parts of this program continued after 2004. Should we just accept at face value without any verification the Supreme Leader's denial of any nuclear weapons effort now, particularly since he also denies that any bomb program existed prior to 2004? No country dedicated to preventing the spread of nuclear weapons can accept the Supreme Leader's public statements about the peaceful intent of its nuclear program until Iran comes clean about past military nuclear programs and clears up questions about whether some parts continue. The IAEA stands ready to do that. Media reporting on what may occur if Iran decides to build nuclear weapons is responsible reporting on a major concern of the United States public and the rest of the world.

The Media Matters report seems not to recognize when the media is discussing past or possibly on-going nuclear weaponization work versus reporting on Iran's current or future nuclear weapons capability. These are different issues that the broadcast media scrutinized by Media Matters has in fact worked hard to cover fairly.

Media Matters' decision to judge negatively a news report if Ahmadinejad is mentioned "in any capacity" is also highly distorting, since he certainly has an important voice as President of Iran and often weighs in on nuclear issues, guaranteeing that he will be quoted. While it is true that President Ahmadinejad does not have the type of control over Iran's nuclear ambitions as the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad routinely makes major announcements regarding Iran's nuclear program and has expressed important policy goals for the program. It is not reasonable to expect a news organization to leave out any mention of Iran's president when reporting on its nuclear program and it is certainly not misleading or biased if a news organization does mention or quote him in a story on Iran's nuclear program.

In summary, Media Matters' methodology leads to conclusions that are likely false and should be discounted. The run-up to the Iraq war did indeed expose troubling shortcomings by the American media when it failed to more critically examine claims made by the Bush administration. ISIS is [all too familiar](#) with the faulty evidence about nuclear weapons programs that the administration misused to generate public support for a war and worked hard to critique the information publicly long before the start of the war. But the situation we are in now with Iran is very different than in the run-up to the Iraq war, and trying to portray the two as similar is inaccurate.

Media Matters Methodology

Excerpt from the Media Matters report on its methodology:

"Media Matters reviewed Nexis transcripts between November 8, 2011 (the day that coverage picked up after the IAEA issued its report) and March 31, 2012 for segments on ABC's World News, CBS' Evening News, and NBC's Nightly News about Iran and its nuclear program. All applicable segments were reviewed for discussion of weaponization and mentions of Ahmadinejad.

Segments that assumed Iran had an active nuclear weapons program or stated that the country would obtain the bomb in less than a year were coded as misrepresenting the facts. Segments that speculated on the consequences if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons were also included because such speculation ignores that no evidence has surfaced to suggest that Iran intends to build nukes.

Any segment that mentioned Ahmadinejad in any capacity was coded as unnecessarily connecting the Iranian president to the country's nuclear program."