

BIBI, ALBRIGHT (AND WARRICK) ON IRAN NUKE REPORT: “BUT WAIT, THERE’S MORE!”

Because there hasn’t been an immediate, multinational hue and cry to bomb Iran over the leaked IAEA report, both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and David Albright, the designated point person for fomenting fears over Iran’s nuclear program in the United States, have been reduced to using their best Billy Mays voice to boom out “But wait, there’s more!”

Netanyahu’s blathering has been dutifully written down and published by Reuters while Albright has found a willing mouthpiece in the Washington Post’s Joby Warrick

Netanyahu told his cabinet yesterday that Iran is closer to getting the bomb than the IAEA report suggests. Here is how Reuters reported his remarks:

“Iran is closer to getting an (atomic) bomb than is thought,” Netanyahu said in remarks to cabinet ministers, quoted by an official from his office.

“Only things that could be proven were written (in the U.N. report), but in reality there are many other things that we see,” Netanyahu said, according to the official.

The Israeli leader did not specify what additional information he had about Iran’s nuclear program during his cabinet’s discussion on the report by the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released last week.

Yup, Netanyahu is telling us he knows more about Iran’s nuclear technology than the rest of the world knows, but he won’t give us details and he

can't prove it. And, of course, it is important to believe everything Netanyahu says.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Joby Warrick saw fit this morning to devote an entire article to building the case that Vyacheslav Danilenko was transferring crucial nuclear technology to Iran rather than helping Iran to develop nanodiamond technology. The accusations against Danilenko come almost exclusively from David Albright and a "report" on Danilenko prepared by Albright's Insitute for Science and International Security.

Warrick does include one brief quotation from a former CIA Iran analyst on how analysts characterize the flow of information into potentially covert programs and a statement from Josh Pollack of Arms Control Wonk. I will return to the Pollack quote below.

Now that Danilenko's work on controlled high explosives detonations creating nanodiamonds has been put forward as a potentially peaceful use of the technology he was helping to develop in Iran, those who promote the view that Iran is working hard now to develop a nuclear weapon find it necessary to provide a stronger connection between Danilenko's work and development of a bomb trigger device. At the same time, Danilenko has responded to press inquiries with a direct "I am not a father of Iran's nuclear program" and "I am not a nuclear physicist."

First, Warrick paints a picture of desperation driving Danilenko to contact Iran:

When the Cold War ended, thousands of weapons scientists suddenly confronted a harsh choice: remain at the weapons institutes at drastically reduced wages or reinvent themselves for the post-Soviet, capitalist economy. For Danilenko, the choice was clear: His knowledge of explosively produced diamonds, called "ultra-dispersed diamonds" or "nanodiamonds," was his ticket out of Chelyabinsk-70.

Danilenko moved to Ukraine, created a company, and searched for investors and partners throughout the West, including the United States. But he struggled as a businessman, and soon his European ventures were short of cash and at risk of collapsing.

In 1995, he decided to do what numerous other Russian weapons scientists before him had done: He contacted the Iranian Embassy to inquire about possible joint ventures, according to the ISIS report, which drew from IAEA documents and interviews.

Warrick then goes on to explain how Danilenko's inquiry was answered by the head of the laboratory that the IAEA suspects as being the center of Iran's work to develop a nuclear bomb.

The problem here, as it is with all efforts to understand both Danilenko's earlier work with the Soviets and his subsequent work with Iran, is that "dual use" technology poses a particular challenge in that there are both civilian and military uses. The precisely timed, spherical high explosive technology in which Danilenko specializes is a prime example of this sort of dual use technology. Warrick makes an issue of Danilenko's work being "highly classified" by the Soviets, but because the technology can be used to trigger nuclear devices in missile warheads, it undoubtedly would have been classified in the US at that time, as well.

Getting back to Warrick's quote from Josh Pollack of Arms Control Wonk, we see that it is in reference to a "fiber-optic instrument that measures precisely when a shock wave arrives along thousands of different points along the surface of a sphere". Pollack's quote is "This type of system appears suitable for testing a sphere of conventional explosives designed to compress the fissile core of a nuclear warhead" and Warrick also points out that "Such instruments have few, if any, applications

outside nuclear warhead design". Left unsaid, however, is that if one is using the controlled explosions to produce nanodiamonds, it seems the monitoring equipment would be just as useful.

Wouldn't it be just as valid to state that the monitoring technology is "suitable for testing" nanodiamond production technology? That makes one of the "few, if any applications outside nuclear warhead design" for the monitoring technology Danilenko's known work in nanodiamond production.

In the end, it doesn't seem that there is sufficient information yet to place Danilenko's work along the continuum between completely civilian and completely military intentions.

And even if Danilenko's work itself in Iran were completely civilian in its orientation, we don't know the extent to which it has been funneled by Iran into a weapons program.

Albright seems eager for the world to conclude that there is indeed a military intent by the Iranians in developing this technology, but the evidence that has been presented so far is not sufficient for a concrete conclusion.

It should be pointed out once again that the explosive trigger device is used so that nuclear bombs can be reduced in size to fit on a missile warhead. That makes the reports over the weekend of a blast that killed the Iranian head of its missile program very interesting in terms of both his death and the timing of it so close on the heels of the IAEA report. From Reuters:

Iran buried Monday a senior military officer it called the "architect" of its missile defences, killed in a massive explosion at a Revolutionary Guards' arms depot that authorities said was an accident.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei attended the ceremony for Brigadier General Hassan Moqaddam and the 16 other Revolutionary Guards who died in the explosion at their military base Saturday. The blast was so big it was

felt in the capital Tehran, some 45 km (28 miles) away.

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“Martyr Moqaddam was the main architect of the Revolutionary Guards’ canon and missile power and the founder of the deterrent power of our country,” Hossein Salami, the deputy head of the Revolutionary Guards, said in a eulogy at the funeral, state broadcaster IRIB reported.

The AP report on this incident, however, contains a very interesting aside:

An exiled Iranian dissident group, the Mujahedin-e Khalq or MEK, has claimed that the blast hit a missile base run by the Revolutionary guard rather than an ammunition depot.

Somehow, it is much easier to believe that Moqaddam would be at a missile base than that he would be at a random ammunition depot. That leaves one to wonder if this blast was as “accidental” as the losses of the centrifuges that were taken out by the Stuxnet worm.