

AMID CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM FOR P5+1 TALKS, IRANIAN, ISRAELI SPIES ARRESTED IN AZERBAIJAN

As we approach the re-start of the P5+1 international talks on Iran's nuclear technology this weekend, there are multiple signals that Iran may be planning to make a major move aimed at reducing tensions. As CNN pointed out yesterday, Iran suggested last weekend that it may halt its enrichment of uranium to the 20% level and return to only enriching to 3.5%:

"Based on our needs and once the required fuel is obtained, we will decrease the production and we may even totally shift it to the 3.5%," Iranian nuclear chief Fereydoun Abbasi said in a televised interview, according to state-run Press TV.

Iran does not plan to produce 20% enriched uranium for long, Abbasi said, according to Press TV.

Uranium enriched at 20% is typically used for hospital isotopes and research reactors, but is also seen as a shortcut toward the 90% enrichment required to build nuclear weapons. Nuclear experts say Iran's supply is far greater than it would need for peaceful purposes.

Iran says there is a medical purpose to its nuclear program.

Further signaling that a big move is in the works, we have this today on PressTV:

"Iran's representatives will participate in the negotiations with new initiatives and we hope that the P5+1 countries will

also enter talks with constructive approaches,” Jalili told reporters in Tehran on Wednesday, IRNA reported.

“The language of threat and pressure against the Iranian nation has never yielded results but will lead to more seriousness in the attitude of the Iranian nation,” he added.

He emphasized, “We are ready to hold progressive and successful talks on cooperation.”

At the same time that we are seeing hints of progress on the diplomatic front, it appears that a number of Iranian and Israeli spies have been taken out of action from their operations bases in Azerbaijan.

Back in the middle of March, Azerbaijan announced they had arrested 22 spies working for Iran:

The authorities in Azerbaijan have arrested 22 people on suspicion of spying for Iran, accusing them of links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

The undated arrests were confirmed in a brief statement by the Azerbaijani national security ministry.

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“Firearms, cartridges, explosives and espionage equipment were found during the arrest,” the Azerbaijani national security ministry said.

The 22 detainees are said to have received orders from the Revolutionary Guards to “commit terrorist acts against the US, Israeli and other Western states’ embassies and the embassies’ employees”.

Yesterday, Iran announced the arrests of a

number of Israeli agents, some of whom are presumed to have been in Azerbaijan and some of whom were in Iran. From Mehr News:

The Iranian Intelligence Ministry, in a statement issued on Tuesday, announced that key members of an Israeli terrorist network have been identified and arrested in the country.

The statement said that intelligence forces, in a series of operations in a number of central and border provinces of Iran, managed to identify a major Zionist network of terror and sabotage and arrest a number of criminal terrorists and mercenaries affiliated with the network.

It added that a large amount of heavy bombs ready to be detonated, machine guns, handguns, silencers, and telecommunications devices were confiscated from terrorists.

The ministry also said that further details about the number of terrorists, their missions, seized equipment, and terrorists' bases of operation cannot be released yet due to security considerations.

Speculation that the spies were based in Azerbaijan comes from the Washington Post:

Although the report did not name the regional country, Iranian media in recent months have quoted several officials as saying that neighboring Azerbaijan has sheltered operatives plotting attacks in Iran.

Earlier this week, MSNBC published a very informative background piece on the use of Azerbaijan as a base for operation of spies on both sides of the Israel-Iran dispute:

A Soviet-legacy oil nation is emerging as a hotbed of global espionage as tension escalates between Israel and Iran.

Azerbaijan, which links Russia to the Middle East, has strategic importance as a bridgehead for the West in its war of diplomacy with Tehran.

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“Like Casablanca in World War II, Baku is now also a center of monitoring Iranian mischief,” Ariel Cohen, senior research fellow at the Washington-based Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, part of the Heritage Foundation, told msnbc.com. “This is understandable taking into account visa-free regime of travel between the two countries and aggressive Iranian intelligence tactics.”

The entire article is a worthwhile read, but it is clear that at least one side product of all this interest in Azerbaijan by other countries is a robust building boom. With the removal of significant numbers of operatives from both sides, however, perhaps covert activities will slow down enough to allow the diplomats a bit of operating space. If not, I’m sure Captain Renault will be along shortly to express his shock that someone would actually try to disrupt negotiations.