

TWO YEARS AFTER ELBARADEI'S DEPARTURE, IAEA JOINS ANTI-IRAN DRUMBEAT



Mohamed ElBaradei (Wikimedia Commons photo)

As I noted on Thursday, the “sport” of predicting when Israel will attack Iran has now moved from the progressive blogosphere to many conventional news outlets. This week will see a major escalation in the anti-Iran rhetoric after the release of a much-anticipated report on Iran from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Many news outlets already are saying this report will be damning for Iran. Today, the Washington Post devotes front-page prominence to its “scoop” of details expected to be contained in the report. The title for the article, which seems meant to be read with breathless fear, is “IAEA says foreign expertise has brought Iran to threshold of nuclear capability”.

Here is the how the Post article opens:

Intelligence provided to U.N. nuclear officials shows that Iran’s government has mastered the critical steps needed

to build a nuclear weapon, receiving assistance from foreign scientists to overcome key technical hurdles, according to Western diplomats and nuclear experts briefed on the findings.

So, outsiders have provided assistance to Iran so that they have “mastered key steps needed to build a nuclear weapon”. But, if we dig a bit deeper in the article, we have a little more detail on just what these “key steps” are. The Post seems to be relying almost exclusively on information provided by David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, a non-partisan organization concentrating on nonproliferation:

Albright said IAEA officials, based on the totality of the evidence given to them, have concluded that Iran “has sufficient information to design and produce a workable implosion nuclear device” using highly enriched uranium as its fissile core. In the presentation, he described intelligence that points to a formalized and rigorous process for gaining all the necessary skills for weapons-building, using native talent as well as a generous helping of foreign expertise.

It would appear that the latest basis for war will be the conclusion that Iran has developed technology for a nuclear trigger. Another aspect of this triggering technology is reported by AP, where they describe a large steel container designed for testing the trigger technology.

These reports simply ignore the major barrier Iran has not yet passed. As I noted on Thursday, Iran’s current capability for uranium enrichment is at 20% uranium and a bomb requires uranium enriched to 90%. But if Iran has been tutored on how to trigger the 90% uranium once it exists and might be carrying out experiments

on that triggering, then now is the time to attack if we listen to those beating the war drums.

But how have we gone from the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that stated unequivocally that Iran suspended all weapons work in 2003 to now, with claims Iran is on the "threshold" of nuclear capability? For one thing, there was a change at the top of the IAEA. The Director General of the IAEA from 1997 to 2009 was Mohamed ElBaradei. Recall that ElBaradei received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. Many believe that ElBaradei's prize was awarded to highlight the difference between his diligent, truth-based work on weapons inspections and nonproliferation and the false "intelligence" on WMD's the Bush administration manufactured as the basis for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The new Director General of the IAEA took over December 1, 2009. Two years seems to be just about the right amount of time for a new attitude to propagate through such an institution, so it seems reasonable to assume that ElBaradei's influence at IAEA is no longer being felt in the new report about to be issued.

I'm not familiar with Yukiya Amano or his previous work. It appears that most of his career has been in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he did spend one year as their director of the Nuclear Energy Division, but that seems to be the extent to which his career may have been intertwined with the problematic Japanese nuclear energy industry.

As for David Albright, whom the Post relied on extensively for its "scoop", the History Commons entry for him shows that he demonstrated a healthy dose of skepticism for Bush administration claims about Iraq in 2003 and did not hesitate to go public with his concerns. That someone with Albright's credibility and track record is concerned about where Iran is headed with their nuclear technology then becomes a reason to look carefully at the new claims being made. I'm a little less concerned

about any “knowledge” Iran may have gotten from outside consultants, as nuclear technology has been around for decades and is hardly a well-protected secret. I would like to see more detailed information, though, on the reported steel container for testing the explosive trigger technology. On the surface, this doesn’t sound like a facility that might have a more peaceful alternative use, so we definitely need to know more about this facility.

In the end, though, the trusted voice of ElBaradei will be missed as the world debates what is going on in Iran. If only the world had listened to him back in 2005. Here is a snippet from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, where he outlined how we could have avoided exactly what is happening in Iran today:

Second, tighten control over the operations for producing the nuclear material that could be used in weapons. Under the current system, any country has the right to master these operations for civilian uses. But in doing so, it also masters the most difficult steps in making a nuclear bomb.

To overcome this, I am hoping that we can make these operations multinational – so that no one country can have exclusive control over any such operation. My plan is to begin by setting up a reserve fuel bank, under IAEA control, so that every country will be assured that it will get the fuel needed for its bona fide peaceful nuclear activities. This assurance of supply will remove the incentive – and the justification – for each country to develop its own fuel cycle. We should then be able to agree on a moratorium on new national facilities, and to begin work on multinational arrangements for enrichment, fuel production, waste disposal and reprocessing.

We must also strengthen the verification

system. IAEA inspections are the heart and soul of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. To be effective, it is essential that we are provided with the necessary authority, information, advanced technology, and resources. And our inspections must be backed by the UN Security Council, to be called on in cases of non-compliance.

This week's report from the IAEA could well determine whether a new war will break out in Iran. It is vital that the IAEA provide sufficient details in its report and in follow-up discussions for the world to determine the reliability of the information in the report. Sources of information should be documented fully and the credibility of those sources needs to be vetted. The determination on the part of Israel and the US for war with Iran feels strikingly like the US determination to attack Iraq in 2003. If the intelligence has been gamed once again, it is incumbent on the citizens of the world to find the flaws in the intelligence and point them out before hostilities break out. Many people pointed out those flaws in 2003 and were ignored. Will the world listen this time if there are flaws in the Iran report?