

THE DIPLOMAT TO JAHN, DAHL IAEA LEAK PIPELINE ON IRAN OPENS ONCE AGAIN

I have often described the process of “diplomats” close to the IAEA’s Vienna headquarters gaining access to documents and other confidential information relating to Iran’s nuclear activities and then selectively leaking the most damaging aspects of that information to George Jahn of AP. Sometimes, the information also is shared with Fredrik Dahl of Reuters, who, like Jahn, is also based in Vienna. Many believe that Israeli diplomats are most often responsible for these leaks and for shaping the stories to put Iran in the worst possible light.

Today that process is in play once again and the “damaging” new information appears to be a letter from Iran to the IAEA in which Iran states that they intend to add thousands of new generation centrifuges called IR-2 centrifuges for the enrichment of uranium. The stories by Jahn and Dahl, already echoed by the New York Times (one can only assume that Joby Warrick will be along a bit later today to complete the first round of the propaganda machine), make this sound like a new and very important breakthrough that will make it much easier for Iran to produce uranium for a nuclear weapon. Only through close reading of the articles do we learn that these new centrifuges will be installed at the Natanz facility and will only be used for low-level enrichment to below 4% uranium (5% in the Dahl article). Enrichment to the more controversial 20% level is carried out at the Fordow facility and even that level is still short of the 90%+ needed for a weapon. Keep in mind also that IAEA regularly monitors both of these facilities and that all uranium has been accounted for, meaning that no 20% material has disappeared for secret conversion

to weapons grade.

None of the articles gets around to pointing out that Iran installed its first IR-2 centrifuges over a year ago and the current development only represents installation of additional IR-2 units. Oh, and in the final paragraph, Jahn grudgingly admits that no time frame for this installation was given and that the installation work has not even started. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Here is Jahn's breathless announcement from today's leak:

Iran is poised for a major technological update of its uranium enrichment program that would vastly speed up production of material that can be used for both reactor fuel and nuclear warheads, diplomats told The Associated Press Thursday.

The diplomats said that Iran last week told the International Atomic Energy Agency that it wants to install thousands of high-technology machines at its main enriching site at Natanz, in central Iran. The machines are estimated to be able to enrich up to five times faster than the present equipment.

Jahn waits until the 13th of 15 paragraphs before getting around to stating that these new centrifuges will only enrich to low levels since they will be at the Natanz facility. Dahl's opening is no less dramatic:

Iran has told the U.N. nuclear agency that it will deploy more modern machines to refine uranium, a defiant move that may further complicate diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute over Tehran's atomic activities peacefully.

The Islamic Republic said in a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency that it will use the new centrifuges at its main enrichment plant near the central town of Natanz, according to an

IAEA communication to member states seen by Reuters.

Such a step could enable Iran to enrich uranium much faster than it can at the moment and increase concerns in the West and Israel about Tehran's nuclear program, which they fear has military links. Iran says its work is entirely peaceful.

With all this panic going around, the Times had to join in:

Iran has told the United Nations nuclear supervisory body that it plans to install more sophisticated equipment at its principal nuclear enrichment plant, a diplomat said on Thursday, enabling it to greatly accelerate its processing of uranium in a move likely to alarm the United States, Israel and the West.

The diplomat, based in Vienna which is the headquarters of the International Atomic Energy Agency, cited a letter from Iranian officials to the I.A.E.A. saying it wants to upgrade its main enrichment plant at Natanz. The upgrade could speed up enrichment by as much as two or three times, the diplomat said, requesting anonymity in light of the confidential nature of the Iranian note.

As I mentioned earlier, Jahn notes at the very end of his article that there is no time frame for this installation. Neither Dahl nor the Times makes this important point in their panic-mongering:

One of three diplomats who spoke to the AP said Iran gave no time frame for its planned upgrade. He said installation work had not started at Natanz, adding it would take weeks, if not months, to have the new machines running once technicians started putting them in.

Considering that Jahn also included this quote from Mark Fitzpatrick of David Albright's Institute for Science and International Security, it appears that Jahn is finally gaining awareness of how he has been used lately to ratchet up anti-Iran sentiment:

"This won't change the several months it would take to make actual weapons out of the fissile material or the two years or more that it would take to be able to mount a nuclear warhead on a missile, so there is no need to start beating the war drums," he said. "But it will certainly escalate concerns".

Fitzpatrick also is quoted by Dahl, but only with the inflammatory "game changer" language, not the calmer disclaimer on the lack of impact on the critical final steps of weapon production.

Note: During the time I was writing the version of the post above, Jahn and AP updated their story, but it retains the URL linked above (when Reuters produces new versions of stories, they get new URL's so their changes can be tracked more easily). Notably, the mention of no time frame for the installation has been moved up to the fourth paragraph and the opening language has been altered significantly. The new version of the story emphasizes what IAEA is saying rather than what diplomats told Jahn. Here are the opening paragraphs of the version of the story times-tamped 8:32 (I failed to save a copy of the previous version with a time-stamp about two hours earlier):

The U.N. nuclear agency has told member nations that Iran is poised for a major technological upgrade of its uranium enrichment program, in a document seen Thursday by The Associated Press. The move would vastly speed up Tehran's ability to make material that can be used for both reactor fuel and nuclear warheads.

In an internal note to member nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency said it received notice last week from Iran's nuclear agency of plans to install high-technology enriching centrifuges at its main enriching site at Natanz, in central Iran. The machines are estimated to be able to enrich up to five times faster than the present equipment.

Although the word "diplomats" still appears in the headline for the story ("Diplomats: Iran Prepared to Up Nuclear Program") Jahn does not reference a diplomat until the fourth paragraph when he talks about the time frame. It's almost as if Jahn and his editors are starting to realize how formulaic the diplomat to Jahn pipeline has become. Of course, anyone who has been paying attention knows how AP "saw" the document Jahn describes in his opening, he is just being less direct about it in this new version of the story.