

YELLOWCAKE IN THE SOLES OF HIS SHOES



Splash page of alibaba.com, where it would appear that Patrick Campbell became Cassim and was unable to exit with his treasure.

Last night, The Smoking Gun and then CBS reported on the latest sting carried out by our government to keep us safe from people too stupid for their own good. This time, instead of the FBI setting up the security theater sting, it was an undercover agent for ICE, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement within the Department of Homeland Security. The criminal complaint (pdf) filed yesterday is written by an ICE Special Agent working out of Miami (I'll return later to the ironic job position she holds).

Once again, as we see repeatedly in the government's adventures in security theater, we appear to have ensnared a small-time hustler but will undoubtedly play this up as a major interdiction of international terrorism. The hustler this time is one Patrick Campbell, who stands accused of brokering a deal to sell U_3O_8 to Iran. Campbell apparently was promising to ship 1000 tons of the processed uranium ore, but was arrested in New York ~~yesterday~~ Wednesday when he entered the country from Sierra Leone, where he reportedly lives.

How was Campbell caught? Here is how the complaint describes the elaborate trap ICE devised:

12. In or about May 2012, an ICE undercover agent (UCA) posted an advertisement on the website "Alibaba.com" in which the UCA purportedly was seeking to purchase Uranium 308. In or about May 2012 the ICE undercover agent (UCA) who was acting as an American broker representing the interests of individuals in Iran who were seeking to purchase Uranium 308 (hereinafter "U308"), received a response to this advertisement from PATRICK CAMPBELL who expressed interest in selling U308 from Sierra Leone. CAMPBELL informed the UCA that he was affiliated with a company named Horizon (SL) Limited which was engaged in the mining and selling of Uranium, Chromite, Gold and Diamonds for export to international companies. CAMPBELL advised that Horizon had mines in the Soa, Koduma and Tonbodu regions of Sierra Leone.

Yup. Everybody knows that Iran absolutely would go shopping for uranium on alibaba.com. Note that ICE does not appear to be able to get their high-tech document production equipment to produce subscripsts. There really is no such thing as Uranium 308 or U308. Writing it that way makes it look like they are referring to a uranium isotope. The naturally occurring isotopes of uranium are listed here, where we see that the atomic masses range from 232 (= U-232) to 238 (=U-238). The isotope of interest is U-235, which occurs in nature as only 0.7% of the uranium atoms. Uranium is mined as raw ore which is chemically treated to produce U_3O_8 , which is otherwise known as yellowcake. For further processing, the yellowcake is then converted to UF_6 gas and then put into gas centrifuges where the mixture is selectively enriched for the U-235 isotope. Low-grade enriched uranium has the U-235 enriched from the naturally occurring 0.7% to the range of 3-5%. Iran has also produced mid-grade uranium at 20% U-235 for its research reactor used to produce medical isotopes, but this still falls short of the 90% or so U-235 needed for a nuclear weapon.

It would appear that ICE ran this scam on such a short budget that they wouldn't even front Campbell the money for travel to the US from Sierra Leone. In his negotiations with the undercover agent, Campbell demonstrated a pitiful level of awareness of operational security. The complaint notes many

communications with Campbell by email, telephone and Skype. There is no indication that any of the communications were encrypted. The extent of his op-sec appears to be his brilliant use of an acronym to refer to the transaction:

18. On June 6, 2012, CAMPBELL engaged in a telephone call with the UCA and requested an update from the UCA and advised the UCA in a telephone call that he would prepare an Memorandum of Understanding once the UCA provides details for the transaction. The UCA advised CAMPBELL that they need to be discrete and careful because the transaction is being financed through a company in Florida and CAMPBELL suggested that ~~the~~ ^{Jim} no longer use the word Uranium in their discussion and suggest that

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they refer to it as "MEUS" which CAMPBELL advised would stand for Middle Eastern Uranium Shipment. ^{Jim}

Campbell finally made it to New York ~~yesterday~~ Wednesday, where he was promptly arrested. Here is how The Smoking Gun opened their report:

A foreigner who agreed to sell undercover Homeland Security agents 1000 tons of yellowcake uranium for shipment to Iran was arrested yesterday when he flew into the United States with uranium samples hidden inside the soles of shoes in his luggage, The Smoking Gun has learned.

Wow. He tried to hide his yellowcake samples in the soles of his shoes, which he then put into checked baggage.

This whole episode is stupid and wasteful on a wide range of levels.

First, Iran purchased huge stockpiles of yellowcake back in the days of the Shah. Further, Iran is very close to being self-sufficient in domestic yellowcake production. Even David Albright's ISIS admits a production

capacity of about 70 tons of uranium per year at the known mining sites. The latest IAEA report on Iran (pdf) notes that since Iran's centrifuges came online in 2007, about 85.6 metric tons (one English ton is 0.9 metric tons) of UF₆ have been fed into the centrifuges. At the current rate of consumption, it is clear that outside yellowcake is not needed by Iran.

Even more than the fact that Iran may not need outside sources of yellowcake, it seems virtually impossible that they would fall for someone claiming to be supplying yellowcake from Sierra Leone. Uranium is not listed among Sierra Leone's mining products, which are diamonds, gold, bauxite, rutile and iron ore. The prospect for mining uranium in Sierra Leone is mentioned in one WikiLeaks cable from 2009 that described "Russia, Iran, Libya and others" as interested in the mining rights, but the prospecting has not yet progressed to mining and Sierra Leone does not appear on the list of African countries from which uranium is produced.

So to believe this plot, we are supposed to think that Iran is so desperate for uranium that it would resort to shopping on a website set up for small businesses to sell to one another, and that they would even resort to using a site with a name that reflects an Arabian folk tale involving magic and thieves. And then on the other side of the story we are supposed to believe that Iran would fall for a con artist who doesn't even bother to provide a plausible explanation for the source of the material he claims to be selling.

But the ultimate irony here may lie in the the ICE agent who wrote the criminal complaint. Here is how she described herself:

1. I am employed as a Special Agent with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), United States Department of Homeland Security, Ft Lauderdale, Florida, and have been since March 2008. I am presently assigned to the Counter Proliferation Group which investigates violations of the Arms Export Control Act, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the Export Administration Act. Prior to being employed as a Special with ICE, I was a Political Analyst with the Counter-Terrorism Center at the Central Intelligence Agency.

Gosh, I wonder why this person with counterproliferation experience is no longer in CIA? Didn't CIA look into a yellowcake scam before? Oh yeah, and then the Barnacle Branch blew the cover of the covert operative and likely dispersed the whole team..