

TRANSCRIBING OBAMA ADMINISTRATION IRAN SPIN, SANGER ADVANCES FALSE “BREAKOUT” CAPABILITY

Marcy will be along later to discuss the shiny thing aspect of David Sanger's New York Times article where he was awarded today's transcription prize by the Obama administration and allowed to “break” the story in which the US for the first time admitted its role in cyberwarfare against Iran's nuclear program. What I want to concentrate on here is how in putting forward the cyberwarfare story, Sanger unquestioningly accepts the administration's framing that Iran is just a short “breakout” away from having multiple nuclear weapons.

Consider this key paragraph:

These officials gave differing assessments of how successful the sabotage program was in slowing Iran's progress toward developing the ability to build nuclear weapons. Internal Obama administration estimates say the effort was set back by 18 months to two years, but some experts inside and outside the government are more skeptical, noting that Iran's enrichment levels have steadily recovered, giving the country enough fuel today for five or more weapons, with additional enrichment.

All Iran needs is “additional enrichment” for “five or more weapons”. That assumption is false on many levels. First, because Iran's enrichment activities are closely monitored by onsite IAEA inspectors, any activity aimed at above the 20% level which is their current upper bound would

be detected quickly. That statement is backed up even by David Albright, who has been busy fanning the anti-Iran rhetoric on the Parchin front. Adding further doubt to a rapid breakout of enrichment is that even in this same article, Sanger notes that Iran's centrifuge technology is old and unreliable. Albright supports that observation as well, and notes that installation of additional capability has been slowed by technical issues that don't seem related to cyberattacks.

The second major flaw in Sanger's transcription above is that more than just "additional enrichment" is needed. The whole cat and mouse game at Parchin is playing out because in addition to enrichment of uranium to weapons grade, Iran will need technology for initiating the nuclear chain reaction that results in the weapon being detonated. Sanger makes no mention at all of this technical barrier for which there is no evidence that Iran has made an appropriate breakthrough.

Heck, the "enough uranium for five bombs" framing requires us to count the material enriched to only 3.5%. That makes it surprising the US and Israel aren't claiming that Iran has enough uranium for an unlimited number of bombs if you count the uranium in the ground that they haven't mined yet.

Roja Heydarpour, writing at The Back Channel, brings us this bit of reassurance from David Albright that any Iranian attempts at enrichment to weapons grade would be caught quickly:

While Iran theoretically has enough low-enriched uranium already to make five nuclear weapons, Albright said Iran would be caught within two-to-four weeks by IAEA inspectors if it tried to divert this material to make weapons-grade uranium. He said there was "little chance Iran will break out in 2012" and probably well into 2013.

Regarding the low grade of Iran's centrifuge technology, Albright had this to say:

But Iran's progress toward bomb capacity is not as fast as some have feared and there is ample time for more talking, according to David Albright, president and founder of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security. Albright told an audience at the Atlantic Council on Tuesday that "the technical clock is not ticking as fast" as the "political clock." The latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency on the Iranian nuclear program shows that Iran is still having trouble building more advanced centrifuges than the breakdown-prone P-1 centrifuge, which is based on a Dutch design from the 1970s that was passed to Iran by the Pakistani nuclear black market king A.Q. Khan. Iran also appears to be having difficulty getting materials for the P-1s. Of more than 2,000 centrifuge casings installed earlier this year at the underground Fordow plant near Qom, only a few hundred have had rotor assemblies installed in them, Albright said.

Sanger does also note that "Iran's P-1 centrifuges" are of "an aging, unreliable design that Iran purchased from Abdul Qadeer Khan". However, he fails to realize that this is a barrier against progress by Iran.

In perhaps the most tone-deaf part of his transcription, Sanger even makes passing reference to the false intelligence put forward against Iraq in 2003 by the Bush administration without realizing that he is playing a major role in doing what may well be the same thing for the Obama administration and Iran:

The impetus for Olympic Games dates from 2006, when President George W. Bush saw few good options in dealing with Iran.

At the time, America's European allies were divided about the cost that imposing sanctions on Iran would have on their own economies. Having falsely accused Saddam Hussein of reconstituting his nuclear program in Iraq, Mr. Bush had little credibility in publicly discussing another nation's nuclear ambitions.

Never mind that 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (pdf) that stated in part, that Iran's weapon development stopped in 2003 and:

We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.

and:

Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005. Our assessment that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously.

But then, if Iran isn't actively pursuing a nuclear weapon we can't have a Badass President making tough decisions to attack their technology.