

JOBY WARRICK IS THE NEW JUDY MILLER

Poor Joby Warrick. With Judy Miller so disgraced that Fox News had to issue a “she has nothing to apologize for” press release when they hired her back in 2008, Joby drew the short straw yesterday and was assigned to transcribe the ~~hyped bullshit~~ concerns arising from Israel Syria’s neighbors that Syria might be contemplating use of biological weapons. The entire Warrick article needs to be read to get a full feel for its credulous recitations of completely unfounded speculation being passed off as actual intelligence, but I will stick with just a few paragraphs. Warrick opens by making a completely baseless claim:

Last month’s alleged chemical attack near Damascus has refocused attention on Syria’s 30-year-old biological weapons research and raised concerns about whether the government there could activate an effort to make a weapon.

Really, Joby? Aside from those “intelligence officials in two Middle East countries” who fed you this material, has anybody else voiced a concern that Syria is contemplating use of bioweapons, or even could produce bioweapons if they wanted to?

Even Warrick has to admit that any work on bioweapons in Syria is now over 30 years old. But that doesn’t deter Warrick and the spooks whispering in his ear:

Syria’s bioweapons program, which U.S. officials believe has been largely dormant since the 1980s, is likely to possess the key ingredients for a weapon, including a collection of lethal bacteria and viruses as well as the modern equipment needed to covert them into deadly powders and aerosols, according to U.S. and Middle Eastern

officials and weapons experts.

Wow. the “US and Middle Eastern officials and weapons experts” guiding Warrick’s hands on the keyboard as he types are saying that despite not working on bioweapons for thirty years or so, they have the deadly organisms and equipment that would be needed to make “deadly powders and aerosols”.

Warrick and the spies who feed him have absolutely nothing on which to base this accusation. Let’s check a neutral source on what the real status of biotechnology capability in Syria is and whether it can be rapidly adapted to bioweapons. The Nuclear Threat Initiative provides a report on Syria’s potential bioweapons capability that was last updated in February of this year. They come to very different conclusions than Warrick (emphasis added):

In the past, unclassified statements by U.S. officials occasionally claimed reason to suspect Syria of maintaining an offensive BW program. [2] However, in contrast to discussions of Syrian chemical warfare (CW) capabilities, such claims have not included any details on the size and scale of Syria’s potential BW program, and are not presented alongside supporting evidence. Instead, discussions on this topic have focused on speculative extrapolations of Syrian dual-capable industry and on Syrian political motivations. Such analysis can be neither detailed nor comprehensive. Although the existence of a biotechnology industrial base would suggest that Syria has some indigenous expertise useful for developing a biological weapons capability, it does not imply and cannot confirm the existence of an offensive biological weapons program. Furthermore, given that Israel, a state that is understood to possess a nuclear arsenal and continues

to occupy the Golan Heights, remains Syria's primary security concern, and given the risk of "blowback" when deploying biological weapons, such weapons would be of questionable tactical desirability from a Syrian perspective. While public sources on the nature of Syria's chemical and nuclear programs are limited, even less exists about Syria's biological program, and "there is no hint of its existence from open sources." [3]

The report goes on to detail what Syria's biological industries do (again, emphasis added):

As of 2010, the Syrian pharmaceutical industry included eight or nine large firms practicing modern production techniques, 25 mid-sized companies producing generics, and 25 factories of limited functionality. [10] By some estimates, Syria's pharmaceutical companies produced 5,700 types of products and employed a workforce of 17,000. [11] In 2011, Syria's pharmaceutical industry claimed an estimated output valued at \$500 million, \$350 million of which was consumed in the domestic market. [12] Syrian pharmaceutical companies produce a broad range of generic pharmaceuticals, including antibiotics, antifungals and antivirals, and vitamins. [13] The growth of Syria's pharmaceutical industry suggests domestic expertise in the biosciences. However, Syria's burgeoning pharmaceutical sector has focused primarily on generic drugs, rather than novel research and discovery. [14] Therefore, this activity does not necessarily imply any experience in working with select agents or any development of weaponization techniques.

I would take that information a bit further and state that Syria's concentration on production of generic pharmaceuticals fits better into a chemical weapons program than a biological one.

After quoting extensively from one "expert" cautioning us that we need to be very afraid of Syria's bioweapons capability, Warrick concludes his article with what almost certainly should have been the lede:

Other weapons experts view Syria's biomedical expansion as intriguing but not necessarily alarming. "Syria has a chemical weapons program, so anything they do is suspect," said Jeffrey Lewis, a weapons expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, Calif. "It's easy to see the devil behind every woodpile. But I suspect there's probably not a lot there."

I want to go back to that accusation about Syria producing "deadly powders and aerosols", because we have a wealth of information from the 2001 anthrax attacks in the US that helps to put Warrick's fearmongering here into perspective. I have long suspected that the anthrax material used in those attacks was produced at the Project Bacus facility in Nevada that Judy Miller first disclosed on September 4, 2001. I suspect further that a very sophisticated technology for weaponizing the spores might have been used.

If we go back to events as they unfolded, however, recall that Brian Ross joined in the fearmongering to accuse Iraq of being involved in the anthrax attacks because the material contained bentonite. That turned out to be completely false with regard to both Iraq and bentonite, but helped to inflame passions against Iraq.

Warrick shows no initiative in his accusations against Syria, because he could have recycled

the whole bentonite approach from Ross. Syria sells bentonite on alibaba.com, the site where an undercover ICE agent ran its sting on the man who wanted to sell uranium yellowcake to Iran through a US broker. Perhaps Warrick finally got around to finding out just what this bentonite stuff is:

Unhappy with the inconvenience of traditional litters, biochemist and cat lover Thomas Nelson began investigating alternative clay formulations in the early 1980s. He observed that a certain type of clay called bentonite clumped up in the presence of moisture, allowing waste to be isolated and scooped out, leaving behind clean litter. Today, roughly 60% of the cat litter sold in the U.S. is of the clumping variety, and most of it is made from bentonite clay.

That's right. The last time fearmongering was used on bioweapons, we were told to believe that kitty litter is just as good a material for weaponizing anthrax as highly sophisticated polymer chemistry requiring advanced equipment and protective measures.

If we see new bioweapons being unleashed on the world, Syria would be pretty low on my list of likely perpetrators. Many known former bioweapons workers are now being supplied with "peaceful" laboratories in which to carry out work that is meant to be beneficial rather than destructive, so there is always the fear of a rogue operator at one of these sites.

Sadly, it's not just Warrick and bioweapons where we are seeing an all-out blitz on condemnation of Syria. The New York Times yesterday reported on the finding that Syria has long been known to be using cluster bombs in its attacks on rebel factions. Unfortunately, the article fails to mention the recently announced US sale of cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia or the concerns raised that when US cruise missiles are fired into Syria, some may contain cluster

bombs.

There are indeed a number of fronts on which Syria is to be faulted for its atrocious behavior, but the current rage being displayed in the press is failing miserably at providing any perspective on where Syria fits on the global scale of bad actors. But alas, Warrick will labor on with his transcription of accusations against Syria despite the US concluding that offensive bioweapons work there stopped thirty years ago. After all, he continues to push the story that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon despite a national intelligence estimate (pdf) that stated conclusively that Iran stopped its nuclear weapon program in 2003.