

RUMORED SATELLITE IMAGERY OF PARCHIN “CLEAN-UP” FAILS TO MATERIALIZE, CLAIM DEBUNKED

Back on March 7, AP’s Vienna correspondent George Jahn wrote that two diplomats, described as “nuclear experts accredited to the International Atomic Energy Agency” informed him that they had seen satellite imagery showing evidence of Iran trying to clean the disputed Parchin site of presumed radioactive contamination arising from work to develop a neutron trigger for a nuclear weapon. Writing yesterday for IPS News, Gareth Porter debunked Jahn’s claims. Porter’s conclusions are buttressed by the fact that David Albright’s ISIS, which Porter notes has published satellite imagery of the Parchin site since 2004 in its efforts to prove Iran is working on a nuclear weapon, has not published any imagery relating to the “clean-up” claims.

Jahn’s March 7 piece opens bluntly:

Satellite images of an Iranian military facility appear to show trucks and earth-moving vehicles at the site, indicating an attempted cleanup of radioactive traces possibly left by tests of a nuclear-weapon trigger, diplomats told the Associated Press on Wednesday.

But a bit later, Jahn does admit not all the “diplomats” he spoke to agreed on what the photos revealed:

Two of the diplomats said the crews at the Parchin military site may be trying to erase evidence of tests of a small experimental neutron device used to set

off a nuclear explosion. A third diplomat could not confirm that but said any attempt to trigger a so-called neutron initiator could only be in the context of trying to develop nuclear arms.

One major problem with taking the tack of accusing Iran of trying to develop a neutron trigger is that until now, the loudest accusations relating to the Parchin site have centered around development of a high-explosives based trigger. See, for example, this post where I discuss claims from Benjamin Netanyahu, David Albright and Joby Warrick that high explosives work was aimed at a trigger rather than production of nanodiamonds.

But another huge problem with the claim of Iran trying to clean the site is the impossibility of clean-up itself. Jahn even inadvertently gives us a clue:

Iran has previously attempted to clean up sites considered suspicious by world powers worried about Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Iran razed the Lavizan Shian complex in northern Iran before allowing IAEA inspectors to visit the suspected repository of military procured equipment that could be used in a nuclear weapons program. Tehran said the site had been demolished to make way for a park, but inspectors who subsequently came to the site five years ago found traces of uranium enriched to or near the level used in making the core of nuclear warheads.

A spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry clearly explained that such evidence cannot be completely removed :

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast says the allegations are

misleading because such traces are “not cleanable, at all.”

Rather than removing evidence, any attempts by Iran to “clean up” contamination from work on a neutron trigger would merely tell the IAEA where to look for the traces that escaped the cleaning. Also, recall that when the RQ-170 drone crashed in Iran, we learned that sophisticated US drones have “sensors that can detect tiny amounts of radioactive isotopes and other chemicals that can give away nuclear research”. I doubt that the loss of one such drone stopped all flights over Iran, so it would seem that there would be a reasonable chance of detecting clean-up activity around Parchin if it actually took place.

Porter’s debunking centers on the failure of confirming satellite imagery to show up at Albright’s ISIS site, and he points to comments from ISIS’s Paul Brannan in the New York Times on March 8:

Paul Brannan, a senior analyst at the Institute for Science and International Security, a private group in Washington that tracks nuclear proliferation, said he had looked at many images but so far had not found the specific site or signs of any cleanup activity. But he added that the massive scale of development at Parchin made the problem quite challenging. “There’s no way to know whether or not the activity you see in a particular satellite image is cleansing or just regular work,” he said. “They build a lot of stuff. There’s a lot of activity there – always.”

Porter also confirmed that the photos claiming to show clean-up work did not come from the US:

The satellite photographs described to Jahn did not come from U.S. intelligence. Former CIA

counterterrorism official Phil Giraldi told IPS that a U.S. intelligence official had confirmed to him that the officials in question were not talking about intelligence provided by U.S. intelligence.

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That means that the officials were either from Israel or one of its three European allies – the British, French and Germans – who have been working closely with Israel to undermine and finally force a revision of the U.S. intelligence community's 2007 conclusion that Iran has not worked on developing a nuclear weapon since 2003.

In a piece out today, Jahn takes on the task of producing an "Iran fact sheet" on the nuclear technology issue, where he is forced to admit that there is no firm evidence that Iran has taken steps toward re-starting its nuclear weapons program that the US intelligence community has determined to have been stopped in 2003. In fact, Jahn even opens his piece with a nod toward the falsified intelligence on which the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was based:

Nine years ago, the United States invaded Iraq after telling the world that Saddam Hussein had covert weapons programs that could build nuclear arms. In the end, nothing was found. Today, acting on similar fears, Israel is threatening to attack Iran.

Sadly, though, Jahn repeats his description of the claims made to him about the photos purporting to show the clean-up effort, but still won't identify who is making these claims or put forward any of the photos on which they base the claims. Jahn compounds his error by not going into the details of how an attempted clean-up could not be complete enough to avoid

eventual detection. Clearly, the AP has no truth vigilantes on staff.

Postscript: Remarkably, the AP piece I linked above, quoting Ramin Mehmanparast, has now been revised and lengthened during the time this post was being composed. It now bears George Jahn's byline and has a longer quotation from Mehmanparast:

"Those who are familiar with nuclear physics know that these comments are not remarkable in any way," he said. "This is mainly public speculation and not based on logic."

"Basically, nuclear military activities are not cleanable, at all," Mehmanparast said.

Now we have the remarkable case of Jahn serving as a truth vigilante on himself, publishing the physics behind the absurdity of claiming that the Parchin site could be scrubbed of nuclear evidence. And yet, this key fact remains isolated in the article about Iran's denial of the cleaning attempt and has not, as of this writing, been incorporated into Jahn's "fact sheet".