



Spin, Spin, Spin – Rev. 1

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“The bigger the lie...”

Media reporting immediately following the release of the IAEA’s safeguards report focused on Iran’s willingness to discuss the exploding bridge wire (EBW) detonators.¹ That is certainly good news, but did Iran resolve the IAEA’s concern? The answer has to be no or probably not. This fact was only lightly covered in the media over the weekend.²

Too little attention was paid to the fact that Iran did not address the IAEA’s concern that EBWs were part of a nuclear weapon design Iran is alleged to have pursued prior to 2004.³ The IAEA’s November 2011 safeguards report annex detailing evidence it has collected of a covert nuclear weapons program in Iran stated with regard to EBW development: “...Given their possible application in a nuclear explosive device, the fact that there are limited civilian and conventional military applications for such technology, Iran’s development of such detonators and equipment is a matter of concern, particularly in connection with the possible use of the multipoint initiation system...” It continued, “...the Agency has information that Iran has conducted a number of practical tests to see whether its EBW firing equipment would function satisfactorily over long distances between a firing point and a test device located down a deep shaft.”⁴ Yet, just a few months into the long awaited investigation into the possible military dimensions of its nuclear programs, Iran stuck to its 2008 story that its use of EBWs had nothing to do with nuclear weapons.

¹ See for example David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Iran Is Providing Information on Its Detonators, Atomic Agency Says,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2014.

² An earlier version of this report misinterpreted a statement in a blog posting by the Arms Control Association which was quoted in the *New York Times* story referenced above.

³ David Albright, “Background Information on the Exploding Bridge Wire Issue: Crack in the Door?” *ISIS Report*, February 12, 2014. http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/EBW_issue_12Feb2014_final_1.pdf

⁴ Report of the Director General, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2011/65, November 8, 2011. http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf

The IAEA in an understated manner, which is often misinterpreted, stated in its most recent report: “At the technical meeting in Tehran on 26 April 2014 and in a letter dated 30 April 2014, Iran provided the Agency [IAEA] with information and explanations for the Agency to assess Iran’s stated need or application for the development of EBW.” The IAEA did not state it accepts Iran’s answers as true.

And again, the new information--the cause for over-the-top coverage—is, according to the IAEA report: “At a technical meeting in Tehran on 20 May 2014, in response to a request from the Agency, Iran provided additional information and explanations, including showing documents, to substantiate its stated need and application of EBW. Iran showed information to the Agency that simultaneous firing of EBW was tested for a civilian application. This is the first time that Iran has engaged in a technical exchange with the Agency on this or any other of the outstanding issues related to possible military dimensions to Iran’s nuclear programme since 2008. The Agency’s assessment of the information provided by Iran is ongoing.” Iran is adding another use of EBWs, which even if true, is irrelevant to the issue at hand. EBWs have uses besides initiating the high explosives in nuclear weapons. Thus, Iran stating a civilian use does not mean that they were not also used in nuclear weapons development efforts. With dual-use goods, such as EBWs, a civilian use does not disprove a nuclear weapons use. In any case, Iran has had plenty of time since 2008 to develop other non-nuclear uses for EBWs. The fundamental issue about their use in nuclear weapons remains.

So, while it is significant that Iran has been willing to talk about this issue for the first time since 2008 when it unilaterally ended cooperation over the matter,⁵ the key consideration is whether Iran is actually addressing the IAEA’s concerns. More plainly, is it telling the truth? The EBW issue must be taken in the context of the large amount of evidence collected by Western intelligence agencies and the IAEA over many years, detailed in the annex to the November 2011 safeguards report, indicating EBWs were part of a nuclear weapon design effort and military nuclear program. From that perspective, Iran has not answered this issue adequately and appears to have simply elevated the level of its effort to dissemble.

But the IAEA deserves some criticism too. It chooses to use vague and confusing language, and it did not provide information or judgments about the adequacy of Iran’s response on EBWs.⁶ The IAEA should more clearly state that a measure is not resolved if it cannot yet draw conclusions from the information it has obtained. It should provide more detail and avoid ambiguous language in order for the international community to be able to reasonably assess progress and the status of Iran’s implementation of its Framework for Cooperation commitments.

⁵ “Background Information on the Exploding Bridge Wire Issue,” *op. cit.*

⁶ This is not the only example of vagueness. Another is the use of the phrase “not inconsistent,” an obviously incorrect grammatical construction, when referring to some Iranian answers. What this apparently means is that the statement by Iran did not have any detectable inconsistencies but the answer may still not be true or the complete truth.

