

New Media Scoop to Wage War on Iran: “Specialized Magnets”, Alleged “Fast-Track” to Atomic Weapons Capability

By [FAIR](#)

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by Peter Hart

In the run up to the Iraq War, the New York Times ([9/8/02](#)) famously reported on an Iraqi scheme to procure special aluminum tubes that could only have one purpose: Iraq’s secret nuclear weapons program. Saddam Hussein was attempting to “buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes,” and the “diameter, thickness and other technical specifications of the aluminum tubes had persuaded American intelligence experts that they were meant for Iraq’s nuclear program.” The claims were false—Iraq, as it turned out, had no nuclear program—but still hugely influential.

Yesterday, on the front page of the Washington Post ([2/14/13](#)), reporter Joby Warrick has the scoop on what Iran is evidently up to:

Iran recently sought to acquire tens of thousands of highly specialized magnets used in centrifuge machines, according to experts and diplomats, a sign that the country may be planning a major expansion of its nuclear program that could shorten the path to an atomic weapons capability.

Purchase orders obtained by nuclear researchers show an attempt by Iranian agents to buy 100,000 of the ring-shaped magnets—which are banned from export to Iran under U.N. resolutions—from China about a year ago, those familiar with the effort said.

Warrick explains that this “has fueled Western concerns that Iran is planning a major expansion in its nuclear capacity that would allow it to make atomic weapons quickly if it chooses to do so.” That point was underscored by an anonymous source—identified as “a European diplomat with access to sensitive intelligence on Iran’s nuclear facilities, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.”

We are told that the magnets are “made of an unusual alloy known as barium strontium ferrite” and that, like the Iraq tubes, they would seem to have only one purpose:

The specific dimensions spelled out in the order form match precisely—to a fraction of a millimeter—those of the powerful magnets used in the IR-1, a machine that spins at supersonic speeds to purify uranium gas into an enriched form that can be used in nuclear power plants.

So there are some striking similarities, a little over a decade apart. That's not to say, of course, that yesterday's propaganda is today's propaganda; but perhaps some scrutiny is in order.

For starters, we know that Iran seeks to enrich more uranium for what is thus far known to be a peaceful atomic energy program. That they would attempt to purchase parts for those centrifuges might not be surprising; they are banned from doing so.



And some of Iran's enriched uranium stockpile, as Warrick's report acknowledges, has been converted into a metal form that would be difficult, if not impossible, to use for a nuclear weapon. So the real issue is not that Iran is enriching uranium, or wishes to enrich more of it; the question is what they intend to do with it. And so far all evidence suggests that they're doing what they say they're doing.

On a more technical level: Are these magnets only useful for uranium enrichment? The Post tells readers that these magnets are made of an "unusual alloy" and that the "specific dimensions spelled out in the order form match precisely—to a fraction of a millimeter" those of magnets needed for a specific centrifuge.

But a post at the Moon of Alabama blog ([2/14/13](#)) raises some interesting questions. It argues that the magnets in question could have many industrial uses, and that the any such components would need to be precise—within a "fraction of a millimeter" sounds close enough, but in this kind of mechanical engineering close might not cut it. The document obtained by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) that is the basis of this piece is [posted on their website](#), but the technical details are redacted.

This is important not because it proves the Post is wrong; the point is that recent history tells us that [often things are not what they appear to be](#). With respect to Iran, there was a flood of stories in November 2011—most prominent among them one by the Post's Warrick—that claimed Iran was conducting research on explosives that could only be connected to a nuclear weapons program. But [skeptics and experts](#) looked at the intelligence and concluded that the research in question could very easily be part of an industrial nanodiamonds program.

It's worth noting that back in 2002 there was one newspaper that poured cold water on the Iraq tubes story. It was the Washington Post. The reporter? The same [Joby Warrick](#) who wrote this story about Iranian magnets. And whose expertise did he rely on? David Albright of ISIS—the very same person pushing the Iran story now.

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