

Media Reports ISIS Nuclear Plot That Never Actually Involved ISIS

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CBS's claim of a "plot to sell nuke materials to ISIS" is misleading; the assertion that "ISIS looks to buy nuclear weapons" is just wrong.

The Associated Press (AP) published this week ([10/5/15](#)) a thrilling account of how the FBI, in concert with Moldovan authorities, "disrupted" a smuggling ring that was supposedly trying to sell "nuclear material" to ISIS and other terror organizations over a five-year span. The primary developments in the story are almost a year old, but the resurfaced tale made news across the English-speaking world:

'Annihilate America': Inside a Secret, Frightening Scheme to Sell Nuclear Material to ISIS

—Salon ([10/7/15](#))

AP: Smugglers Busted Trying to Sell Nuclear Material to ISIS

—CBS News ([10/7/15](#))

FBI Foils Smugglers' Plot to Sell Nuclear Material to ISIS

—The Independent ([10/7/15](#))

There was only one problem: At no point do the multiple iterations of the AP's reporting show that anyone involved in the FBI sting were members of or have any connection to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (aka ISIL or Daesh). While one of several smuggling attempts discussed in AP's [reporting](#) involved an actual potential buyer—an otherwise unknown Sudanese doctor who four years ago "suggested that he was interested" in obtaining uranium—the "terrorists" otherwise involved in the cases were FBI and other law enforcement agents posing as such. [According](#) to the AP and NBC's Pete Williams:

However, the official emphasized that there was no known ISIS connection. An undercover informant, working with Moldovan police, claimed that he was an ISIS representative.

"But that was totally made up," the official said.

This would not perturb the American press, who [once again](#) eager to hype an ISIS threat, either A) heavily implied this "plot" was evidence of ISIS seeking a nuclear weapon or B)

actually went step further and said as much despite it being wholly untrue.

First the outlets who heavily implied ISIS was involved but used the qualifiers “attempted,” “tried” or the abstract “plots” so as to not expressly lie:

Smugglers Tried to Sell Nuclear Material to ISIS

—NBC News ([10/7/15](#))

Smugglers Try to Sell Nukes to ISIS

—Fox News ([10/7/15](#))

FBI Has Foiled 4 Attempts by Gangs to Sell Nuclear Material to ISIS Through Russian Connections

—Daily Mail ([10/7/15](#))

(Note that the Daily Mail managed to also work the threat du jour into the headline by means of the reference to “Russian connections”—a phrase so vague as to be virtually meaningless.)

Then there were the publications who said ISIS was involved (a falsehood):



AP Investigation Finds That Nuclear Smugglers Shopped Radioactive Material to ISIS and Other Terrorists

—Business Insider ([10/6/15](#))

Nuclear Smugglers Shopped Radioactive Material to Islamic State, Other Terrorists: AP report

—Chicago Tribune ([10/6/15](#))

Again, there was nothing “shopped” to ISIS, because ISIS was never involved. While it’s accurate—if misleading—to say they “attempted” or had a “plot” to sell radioactive material to ISIS, it is factually incorrect to say anyone “shopped” something to people who weren’t in any way involved in the transaction. While it can be said that smugglers “seeking” ISIS is disturbing in and of itself, it’s untrue that this solicitation is evidence of an actual ISIS threat.

Fox News and CBS would take it one step further, by expressly saying the plot was evidence that “ISIS was trying to buy a nuke.”



Fox's Gretchen Carlson [started off an interview](#) with Rep. Mike Turner by asking, "Congressman, what are we supposed to make of this *news that ISIS and other terrorist groups are trying to get their hands on dirty bombs?*" CBS, meanwhile, [led their broadcast](#) by breathlessly revealing "new fears tonight that *ISIS is ready to go nuclear.*"

But neither of these statements are true. This sting does not support the claim that ISIS is "trying to buy a nuke," because "there was no known ISIS connection."

International Business Times' Christopher Harress would take misinformation to whole new heights, [inventing a Jason Bourne narrative](#) out of whole cloth and, evidently, not bothering to read the AP story:

Members of the Islamic State group with links to Russian gangs were trying to get hold of nuclear material to build a radioactive dirty bomb before Moldovan police and FBI operatives stopped them, according to an [investigation](#) reported Wednesday by the Associated Press. The terror group, which is also known as ISIS, had been approached by gangs in Moldova that were specifically seeking a buyer from ISIS.

This is 100 percent false. There is no evidence the Islamic State group (with links to "Russian gangs" or otherwise) were trying to get a hold of radioactive material to build a dirty bomb. What there *is* evidence of is that FBI and local authorities posed as "ISIS" and conned some Moldovan gangsters into selling them some materials that may or may not have actually been "nuclear," much less capable of creating a "dirty bomb"—a weapon, it should be noted, that is thus far [entirely hypothetical](#).

So here we are: Fake FBI ISIS setting up ostensibly real post-Soviet mobsters to purchase material for a potentially deadly device that exists only in the minds of counterterrorism threat risk managers. The media, either agnostic to or incapable of understanding what really happened, paints the picture of the FBI swooping in to stop a Russian/ISIS nuclear conspiracy at the 11th hour.

What takes place, before our very eyes, is a kind of War on Terror [transubstantiation](#). Representational terror plots become real ones, fake enemies become Russo-Jihadi crime syndicates, and an American public, once again, is presented with a cartoonish, wildly inflated threat profile that's increasingly divorced from reality.

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