



The Case Against the Iranian Nuclear Deal Is One Big Lie

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Imagine we were back in 1948. Suppose Joseph Stalin offered to halt the Soviet Union's efforts to develop its own atomic bomb for up to 15 years. As part of the deal, suppose he agreed to let inspectors from the United Nations enter the USSR and monitor all of its nuclear facilities. Suppose he'd even said these U.N. officials could also inspect other Soviet facilities, provided they had valid reasons to suspect proscribed activities were occurring there. To sweeten the offer even more, imagine Stalin said he would also give up a substantial portion of the enriched uranium the USSR had already accumulated, leaving it well short of the amount needed to make a bomb. What did he want in exchange? Just some economic concessions to help rebuild the war-ravaged Soviet economy.

In making this offer, suppose Stalin insisted on retaining the capacity to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes (such as power reactors or medical uses). And let's also suppose he made it clear he wasn't going to withdraw the Red Army from Eastern Europe or stop trying to spread communism in other parts of the world. The Cold War would go on, in short, but the Soviet Union would not be a nuclear weapons state for as long as the agreement remained in force.

It is hard to believe the paranoid Soviet dictator would ever make such an offer, of course. But if he had, do you think Harry Truman, George C. Marshall, and Dean Acheson would have embraced it? You bet they would. And had that deal been in place in 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles would have moved heaven and earth to keep it in force. The reason is obvious: this deal would have kept the USSR from getting atomic weapons until the early 1960s (at least) and made it far less likely that Moscow would surprise us with a sudden demonstration test (as it did in 1949). At a minimum, this arrangement would have extended the warning time surrounding any future Soviet effort to break out and race to the bomb.

To be sure, the counterfactual scenario sketched above is almost unimaginable. Nonetheless, it reminds us how bizarre, short-sighted, and unrealistic the renewed campaign against the Iran nuclear deal is. For in fact, Iran agreed to essentially the same terms I sketched above, thereby removing the possibility of becoming an active nuclear weapons state for at least 15 years. Yet even though this deal is very much to America's advantage — and to the benefit our main regional allies — the same critics continue to snipe at it.

The latest round in their campaign was U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley's disingenuous and falsehood-filled speech at the American Enterprise Institute last week. The speech is useful in one sense: it provides a handy summary of just about every creative and mendacious argument that die-hard opponents of the JCPOA have been cooking up since the agreement was signed. Unfortunately, it is neither an accurate guide to the agreement, to its current status, nor more importantly, to U.S. interests.

Among other things, Haley claimed — falsely — that the deal “gave Iran what it wanted up-front, in exchange for temporary promises to deliver what we want.” The truth is about 180 degrees from this claim: Iran gave up enriched uranium, destroyed 13,000 centrifuges, dismantled the Arak reactor, let the U.N. install monitoring devices, implemented the NPT Additional Protocol, and a host of other measures — all before the United States or anyone else began lifting sanctions.

She also claimed Iran was guilty of “multiple violations,” a lie belied by the fact that the U.S. government and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have repeatedly certified Iran was in compliance. Iran did exceed the negotiated 130-ton limit on heavy water twice (by less than ton each time), and quickly rectified the matter when this was pointed out. She repeated the usual talking neoconservative talking points about Iran's “destabilizing” regional activities — which were never part of the agreement and in fact are a reason to be glad the agreement prevents Iran from getting the bomb — and raises the bogeyman of supposed “undeclared sites” that the IAEA hasn't looked at yet.

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It is easier to make up false charges than to get at the truth, which makes fact-checking the deal's critics an endless and exhausting enterprise. For additional debunking's of Haley's speech, see Paul Pillar [here](#), Emma Ashford's podcast [here](#), and the Diplomacy Works website [here](#).

When facts and logic fail them, opponents of the JCPOA resurrect the myth of a “better deal.” Having failed to stop Obama's original negotiation, they now claim decertifying the deal is the first step to persuading Iran and the other members of JCPOA to agree to major revisions or new restrictions. As I've written before, this is a vain, even laughable, hope. Contrary to unreliable sources like *Bloomberg* reporter Eli Lake, the other signatories remain strongly committed to the agreement and want it to remain intact, even if they would also like Iran to modify some of its other behavior in other ways. More importantly, this view incorrectly assumes the United States has unlimited leverage over Iran, and that getting tough now will magically produce a better deal. That take-it-or-leave-it approach was tried from 2000 to 2012, however, while Iran went from having zero centrifuges to more than 12,000. It was only when the United States showed a willingness to accommodate some of Iran's “red lines” that it actually got them to reverse course. That same logic remains true today.

Details aside, the central realities of the deal remain clear and stark, and no amount of dubious lawyering can alter them. There are, in fact, only three realistic outcomes here. The first option is to keep the JCPOA in force (and ideally, engage Iran in constructive dialogue on the areas where we differ and the areas where our interests may align). As long as the signatories continue to abide by its provisions — and Iran is, despite Haley’s insinuations — then Tehran will not have the bomb and the United States and its allies will be safer.

The second option is letting the JCPOA collapse, thereby removing the constraints on Iran’s nuclear program and leaving it free to develop a bomb if it wishes. Bear in mind that if the United States kills the JCPOA and hawks keep talking about regime change, then Tehran’s hardliners will be strengthened and Iran’s incentive to have some sort of deterrent will increase, thereby making Iran’s entry into the nuclear club more likely. So option 2 means a nuclear-armed Iran.

But if you don’t like that outcome, there’s always option three: preventive war. Yes, just what the United States and the countries of the Middle East really need right now — another war. It’s not enough that we’re still fighting the Islamic State, Syria is still riven with conflict, and Yemen is collapsing amid extremism, disease, and a Saudi aerial bombing campaign. It’s a perfect time to start a war with Iran too, thereby inviting Iranian retaliation either directly or via its regional proxies such as Hezbollah.

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Of course, it won’t surprise you that the people who keep trying to dismantle the JCPOA are mostly the same people who’ve repeatedly called for military action against Iran. And guess what? They are for the most part the same strategic geniuses that told you toppling Saddam Hussein would be easy and cheap and would transform the Middle East into a sea of shiny pro-American democracies. It is frankly a bit astonishing that such people are still taken seriously (and let’s not forget they’ve been consistently wrong about a lot more than that), but nobody ever said the U.S. political system was good at holding people accountable these days.

Yet there may be a silver lining in the Haley gambit and the rest of this deceitful campaign. As with Trump’s DACA “decision” (i.e., having his attorney general announce an end to the program and then giving Congress six months to find an alternative), Haley’s speech stopped short of saying the United States should walk away from the deal. Indeed, she seemed to be mostly laying out a rationale for declaring Iran was not in compliance. This step is something President Donald Trump really, really wants to do (no matter what his senior foreign-policy advisors tell him), which in effect means punting the whole issue over to Congress.

Remember: the need to “certify” Iranian compliance is not part of the JCPOA itself. It was a requirement Congress imposed back when the deal was approved under President Barack Obama. Declaring Iran to be non-compliant (irrespective of what the facts may be), simply kicks the issue down the Mall to Capitol Hill. And that’s where it gets interesting: at that point, would Congress actually take responsibility for torpedoing the deal?

I’m not sure they would. For the past 20 years or more, senators and representatives have been able to score a lot of cheap political points by sponsoring anti-Iranian resolutions, sanctions, and other legislation — mostly intended to show how tough they are and to appease the constant

pressure they get from the Israel lobby (and one suspects, the Saudi lobby as well). That's much easier to do, however, when their actions have no real consequences. Directly ending the JCPOA would mean Congress would own a policy that could either lead to Iran actually getting the bomb or to a situation where the United States had to go to war to prevent it. Does anyone in Congress really want to take full responsibility for either of those outcomes, and in the full glare of public scrutiny? Ironically, Congressional reticence could end up leaving the JCPOA intact.

In the abstract, I'd probably prefer it if more people in Congress were knowledgeable, principled, realistic, and open-minded about foreign affairs, and more willing to stand up to the executive branch on big international issues. But in this case, and given the constellation of forces at play, I'd settle for self-interested and spineless.