



Trump's suspicious scheme to discredit the Iran nuclear deal

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August 24, 2017

President Trump's United Nations Ambassador [Nikki Haley](#) met yesterday with the top officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog that conducts monitoring and inspections inside Iran to ensure Iran is in compliance with the stipulations of the [nuclear deal](#).

The stated reason for the visit was for Ambassador Haley to press the IAEA to inspect Iran's secret military sites, although there is nothing to suggest Iran is engaging in any illicit nuclear research, enrichment or development. Indeed, the IAEA has certified [seven separate times](#) that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear deal, a judgement shared by all of the signatory countries along with the U.S. intelligence community.

For context, recall that the nuclear deal - the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – is a robust non-proliferation agreement under which Iran rolled back its nuclear program, gave up 98 percent of its stockpile of enriched uranium, dismantled two-thirds of its operating centrifuges, and converted a number of its major enrichment facilities into peaceful research centers, among other concessions. Iran also submitted to a long list of restrictions that will phase out over the next 10-25 years, including limiting its uranium stockpile to 300 kilograms of low-enriched uranium (3.67 percent, well below the 90 percent necessary for a nuclear bomb). Iran also agreed to ratify the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which provides for expanded IAEA access and monitoring indefinitely into the future.

According to Georgetown University's [Ariane Tabatabai](#), the JCPOA represents “the most intrusive inspections regime ever voluntarily agreed to by any party.” Currently, there are routine, sometimes daily, inspections of 18 declared facilities, plus another nine locations outside facilities (LOFs), as well as a number of other sites not under safeguard that Iran has allowed the IAEA to inspect. In other words, the access that the IAEA has inside Iran and the transparency on Iran's nuclear program under the JCPOA, is unprecedented.

Why would Ambassador Haley make this trip to Vienna to encourage the IAEA to demand access to Iran's military sites? As she told [Reuters](#) yesterday, the motive had to do with past

assessments that Iran had engaged in illicit nuclear development at undeclared military sites prior to 2003. “If you look ... at past Iranian behavior, what you've seen is there have been covert actions at military sites, at universities, things like that,” Haley explained. Thus, she wanted to press the IAEA with questions like: “Are you looking at everything? Are you looking at those places where there has been covert activity in the past? Are you able to get access to these areas? Or are you being delayed? Are you being shut out from those things?”

The JCPOA clearly outlines a process for inspections at undeclared military sites. If there is evidence of suspicious activity at an undeclared site, the IAEA is to present the evidence to Iran and request clarification. If clarification is deemed unsatisfactory by the IAEA or the deal’s signatories, a voting mechanism will take place that can force Iran to “implement the necessary means” for inspections within three days.

There is no publicly available evidence that Iran is engaging in any illicit activities at undeclared military sites, and no public official of any JCPOA signatory country or of any international agency has made such a claim. But Haley’s visit fuels suspicion anyways. When Iranian officials balked at the notion of inspecting sensitive military sites in the absence of evidence of any breach, Haley responded: “Why would they say that if they had nothing to hide? Why wouldn't they let the IAEA go there?”

It is the Trump administration’s prerogative to meet with the IAEA regarding inspections and monitoring inside Iran, but it is easy to see this effort as disingenuous, given the president’s stated opposition to the JCPOA. President Trump is required every 90 days to formally certify, based on IAEA reports and assessments from the U.S. intelligence community, that Iran is in compliance with the JCPOA. He has done this twice so far, though in July he vowed that he would not do so a third time and that he was willing to defy the recommendations of his top Cabinet officials, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, to affirm Iranian compliance.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump declared his “number-one priority [would be] to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran.” Aside from the fact that the deal has been successful in staving off Iranian nuclear weapons capability for the foreseeable future, one major reason his advisors have walked him back on that campaign promise is because it would isolate the United States on the international stage. None of the other signatories to the JCPOA, including especially our European allies, will play along with a deliberate and unwarranted abrogation of the deal by the Trump administration, meaning re-imposing international sanctions would be a non-starter, even if all of the unprecedented transparency into Iran’s program is lost thanks to Trump’s anticipated nullification of the deal.

That might explain why the Trump administration is pursuing the route taken by Ambassador Haley yesterday. As the Associated Press reported last month:

The Trump administration is pushing for inspections of suspicious Iranian military sites in a bid to test the strength of the nuclear deal that President Donald Trump desperately wants to cancel, senior U.S. officials said.

...The inspections requests, which Iran would likely resist, could play heavily into Trump's much-anticipated decision about whether to stick with the deal he's long derided.

If Iran refuses inspections, the argument goes, Trump finally will have a solid basis to say Iran is breaching the deal, setting up Tehran to take most of the blame if the agreement collapses.

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), a critic of the deal and an ally of the Trump administration, has made the same point publicly. As he told the *Washington Post* in July:

“What I say to the president, and this is what Tillerson, Mattis, and McMaster say to the president, is...you can only tear the agreement up one time. So when you’re gonna tear it up...since nothing bad is happening today...wait until you have your allies aligned with you. Radically enforce it. If you radically enforce it, they are liable...I know right now we’re asking...to get into various facilities in Iran. If they don’t let us in: boom. What you want is you want the breakup of this deal to be about Iran, you don’t want it to be about the United States, because we want our allies with us.”

So, are Haley’s concerns to the IAEA genuine? Or are they part of a scheme to abolish a nuclear deal that is working and that Iran is abiding by? The former possibility would be more credible had President Trump not explicitly stated his intention to destroy the deal regardless of Iranian compliance.

The diplomatic and security implications of a deliberate and disingenuous unraveling of the JCPOA would be dire. Not only will it signal to other nuclear proliferators (e.g. North Korea) that the United States cannot be trusted to uphold its commitments, but it will also put the United States and Iran back on the path to conflict. That is not a future the Trump administration should want.

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