

Netanyahu's theatrical pitch

On Monday, Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu presided over a theatrical press conference](#) that was part TED Talk, part show trial. With “Iran lied” emblazoned in oversize capital letters and props arrayed on the stage, the optics were reminiscent of his speech to the UN General Assembly in 2012, when he famously brandished a picture of a cartoon bomb.

Behind the ‘spectacle’

Mr. Netanyahu pointed to cabinets stacked with files and old-fashioned CD-ROMs, lending the show a curiously anachronistic air. He announced that his country had audaciously spirited out tens of thousands of documents from a secret facility in Iran which “conclusively prove that Iran was brazenly lying when it said it never had a nuclear weapons programme”. The purpose of this spectacle was to put Tehran in the dock once more, this time just two weeks before U.S. President Donald Trump is due to decide whether he will certify, or annul, the nuclear deal painstakingly negotiated in 2015 between Iran and six world powers.

Netanyahu's agendas

But ‘Bibi’s’ big reveal was, in some ways, a big fizzle. Long before the nuclear deal was signed in 2015, there was copious evidence that Iran had spent decades pursuing a clandestine nuclear programme. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), amply supplied by the intelligence agencies of the U.S., Israel and Europe, was able to develop a remarkably detailed picture of these illicit activities. In November 2011, for instance, the Agency produced a diagram showing how the structure of Iran’s nuclear weapons programme had changed over time, in exactly the way that Mr. Netanyahu breathlessly recounted on Monday.

Hardly revelatory

No wonder that Olli Heinonen, former IAEA chief inspector and a fierce critic of Iran in recent years, was underwhelmed. “I just saw a lot of pictures I had seen before,” he told *The Guardian*, noting that many of these had been shown to the IAEA board over a decade ago. It is hardly revelatory that Iran had a secret nuclear weapons programme. Indeed, this is precisely why Western countries, joined by Russia and China, put so much economic, political, and at times military pressure on Iran in the years leading up to 2015. The nuclear deal was not premised on Iranian good faith, but precisely the opposite — like any robust diplomatic agreement. Although the U.S.’s intelligence community judged in 2007 that Iran had largely halted its nuclear weapons programme four years previously, there were credible concerns that some research and development had continued. The deal not only placed sweeping restrictions on Iran’s civilian nuclear activity, thereby limiting how much fissile material Iran would be able to produce for a bomb, but also put into place one of the strongest inspections regimes seen anywhere in the world.

To be clear, Israel’s intelligence coup is undoubtedly impressive. The exfiltration of such a remarkable trove will one day make a fine *Argo*-like movie. The data are likely to be of real value, perhaps corroborating the IAEA’s existing knowledge of Iran’s nuclear weapons programme, adding new details to the picture, or, most importantly of all, helping the Agency ascertain how much of that work continued beyond the early 2000s. Those who implausibly insisted that Iran was innocent of all charges, framed by artful adversaries, look even more foolish today. These documents may not be new; they are nevertheless a damning indictment of Iran’s brazen dishonesty over a long period.

If Iran slips away

Yet far from undercutting the Iran deal, they reinforce its importance. If the U.S. walks away from its commitments on May 12, Iran would be free to reinstall advanced centrifuges, pile up enriched uranium, and revert to less intrusive inspections. The international community would have fewer opportunities to clarify its understanding of the weapons programme described in these documents, ultimately increasing the risk of on-going or future deception.

If the deal were to collapse under this mounting pressure, it would come at an extraordinarily sensitive time in West Asia. As Iranian forces bed down in southern Syria, Israel is aggressively trying to root them out. Late on Sunday, air strikes — almost certainly carried out by Israel — struck several airbases in Syria used by Iranian forces, including a depot for surface-to-surface missiles, reportedly killing almost a dozen Iranians. Such raids are becoming a near weekly occurrence. Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are also growing, with Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's callow Crown Prince and de facto ruler, repeatedly comparing Iran's leader to Hitler.

Meanwhile, a hawkish new national security team is taking over the reins in Washington, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton flanking the President. Mr. Netanyahu's performance on Monday, timed for lunchtime in Washington and delivered in English, was intended largely for this audience. It will spur on their reckless efforts to pour fuel onto a raging fire.

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