

Targeting Tehran: on Netanyahu's revelations on Iran

The timing of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claim that [Iran had a robust nuclear weapons programme](#) is not lost on anyone. On Monday, Mr. Netanyahu shared thousands of documents related to Iran's nuclear programme at a time when U.S. President Donald Trump is considering ripping up the Iran nuclear deal. Mr. Trump, who has never hidden his opposition to the deal signed by the Obama administration with Iran and five other countries, is expected to take a decision before May 12. The documents Mr. Netanyahu cited were stolen from Iran by Israeli spies, and suggest that Iran had a robust nuclear weapons programme before the multilateral deal was signed — while Iran had always maintained that its nuclear programme was for civilian purposes. Mr. Netanyahu argued that the documents pointed to an act of deceit on Iran's part, a claim the U.S. immediately backed. But Israel's opposition to the Iran deal is not new. The Obama administration had gone ahead with multilateral talks with Iran despite opposition from two of the U.S.'s strongest West Asian allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. But with the new U.S. administration under Mr. Trump taking an increasingly hostile line towards Iran, Israel has also stepped up its attack on the nuclear deal. Mr. Netanyahu's 'revelations' are clearly aimed at setting the stage for, and influencing, Mr. Trump's big decision on the deal in the coming days.

Netanyahu's theatrical pitch

The problem with Mr. Netanyahu's presentation is that it relates to a pre-nuclear deal Iran. Even if the documents are authentic, they suggest that Iran had a nuclear weapons programme. There is no indication that Iran has violated the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the international agreement signed between Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and Germany. Even the Trump administration, which backs Israel's claims, doesn't say Iran is in violation of the nuclear deal. After Mr. Netanyahu's press conference, the International Atomic Energy Agency too said it has no credible information to show that Iran has violated the agreement. So if Iran indeed had an active weapons programme as Israel claims, the nuclear deal has ended it. This only bolsters the argument in favour of the deal. In other words, the U.S. and Israel are yet to make a convincing argument on why the Iran deal should be scrapped. But if Mr. Trump does pull the U.S. out of the pact and reimposes sanctions on Iran, that would be a disincentive for Tehran to stay in compliance with the agreement. So, practically, if Mr. Trump decides to pull out of the Iran deal, it would start the unravelling of an agreement that nobody has violated. The U.S. should assess the agreement based on its merit and outcomes, not on narrow geopolitical or ideological calculations.

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