

Iran deal has been a lie all along

“The sanctions lifting will only occur as Iran takes the steps agreed, including addressing possible military dimensions.”

That was State Department spokesman John Kirby in June 2015, speaking as negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal were wrapping up. But Tehran did not “take the steps agreed.” The deal was founded on a lie.

Two lies, actually. The first was Iran’s declaration to the International Atomic Energy Agency, before the implementation of the deal, of the full extent of its past nuclear work. This was essential, both as a test of Tehran’s sincerity and as a benchmark for understanding just how close it was to being able to assemble and deliver a nuclear warhead.

The second lie was the Obama administration’s promise that it was serious about getting answers from Tehran. In a moment of candor, then-Secretary of State John Kerry admitted “we are not fixated on Iran specifically accounting for what they did at one point in time or another” — but then he promised Congress that Iran would provide the accounting.

That was when the White House feared Congress might block the deal. When it failed to do so, thanks to a Democratic filibuster, the administration contented itself with a make-believe process in which Iran pretended to make a full declaration and the rest of the world pretended to believe it.

“Iran’s answers and explanations for many of the IAEA’s concerns were, at best, partial, but overall, obfuscating and stonewalling,” David Albright and his colleagues at the nonpartisan Institute for Science and International Security wrote in December 2015. “Needed access to sites was either denied or tightly controlled as to preclude adequate inspections.”

So much, then, for all the palaver about the deal providing an unprecedented level of transparency for monitoring Iranian compliance. So much, also, for the notion that Iran has honored its end of the bargain. It didn’t. This should render the agreement null and void.

That’s the significance of Benjamin Netanyahu’s show-and-tell Monday of what

appears to be a gigantic cache of pilfered Iranian documents detailing Tehran's nuclear work. The deal's defenders have dismissed the Israeli prime minister's presentation as a bunch of old news — just further proof that Iran once had a robust covert program to build a bomb. They also insist Iran has complied with the terms of the agreement since it came into force in January 2016.

Yet it's difficult to imagine that the IAEA can now square Iran's 2015 declaration with what the Israelis have uncovered. Iran's mendacity is no longer the informed supposition of proliferation experts such as Albright. It is — assuming the documents are authentic, as the U.S. has confirmed — a matter of fact that the IAEA chose to ignore when it gave Iran a free pass under political pressure to move to implement the deal. If the agency cares for its own credibility as a nuclear watchdog, it should decide that Iran's past declaration was false and that Iran's retention of the documents obtained by Israel, with all the nuclear know-how they contain, put it in likely breach of the agreement.

As for Iran's current compliance, of course it's complying. The deal gave Iran the best of all worlds. It weakened U.N. restrictions on its right to develop, test and field ballistic missiles — a critical component for a nuclear weapons capability that the Iranians haven't fully mastered. It lifted restrictions on Iran's oil exports and eased other sanctions, pumping billions of dollars into a previously moribund economy. And it allows Iran to produce all the nuclear fuel it wants come the end of the next decade.

Yes, Iran is permanently enjoined from building a nuclear weapon, even after the limitations on uranium enrichment expire. But why believe this regime will be faithful to the deal at its end when it was faithless to it at its beginning?

Netanyahu's revelations were plainly timed to influence President Donald Trump's decision, expected later this month, on whether to stay in the Iran deal. Trump is under pressure from the French, British and Germans to stay in it, on the view that, if nothing else, the agreement has kept Iran from racing toward a bomb.

But the deal now in place allows Iran to amble toward a bomb, even as it uses the financial benefits of the agreement to fund its militancy in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and especially in Syria. And Iran's own nuclear history suggests the country's leaders have always been cautious in the face of credible American threats, which

is one reason they shelved much of their nuclear program in 2003 after the U.S. invaded Iraq.

I opposed the Iran deal, but immediately after it came into effect, I believed that we should honor it scrupulously and enforce it unsparingly. Monday's news is that Iran didn't honor its end of the bargain and neither need the United States now. Punitive sanctions combined with a credible threat of military force should follow.

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