

Netanyahu and the Iran Nuclear Deal: Using Half-Truths to Support a Lie

by Riccardo Alcaro

In a highly choreographed presentation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed he had proof the Iran nuclear deal was “based on lies” and that Iran has been systematically skirting its commitments vis-à-vis international actors.¹ These allegations, and the manner in which they were presented, deserve a measure of praise, some explanation, an outright denial as well as harsh criticism.

One cannot but *praise* Netanyahu’s public relations skills. His PowerPoint presentation, delivered in fluent English, conveyed a powerful message that “55,000 pages of evidence and a further 55,000 files on 183 CDs” smuggled out of Iran by the Israeli intelligence services prove the Islamic Republic is in breach of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA), the official name of the nuclear deal. While this is what most people with limited or no knowledge of the issue seem to have come away with, Netanyahu did not explicitly utter those words.

Here is where the need for *explanation* emerges. Netanyahu carefully constructed his presentation so that he could not be accused of spreading false information while however maximizing his ability to fuel the groundless perception that Iran has in fact cheated on the nuclear deal.

Iran has always denied efforts to acquire military nuclear capabilities. Netanyahu was right in saying that the documents unequivocally prove that Iran had in fact developed a nuclear weapons programme. However, he failed to mention that Iran halted most of its military-related nuclear work back in 2003. He also forgot to remind

¹ “Israel’s Iran Documents Show Nuclear Deal ‘Was Built on Lies’”, in *BBC News*, 1 May 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43958205>.

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his audience that those who struck the JCPOA – the US, Europe, Russia and China – were well aware of these past Iranian efforts. US intelligence had actually made this information public in a November 2007 declassified report.²

If a half-truth is employed to support a groundless claim, the dividing line between mastering communication and manipulating information becomes blurred. This is undoubtedly the case with Netanyahu's televised presentation and his "errors" of omission.

The military components of Iran's nuclear programme – or the "possible military dimensions" (PMDs) to employ the official jargon of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – were obviously addressed in the negotiations over the 2015 nuclear deal. The US and Europe demanded that Iran come clean on its past activities during confidential exchanges with the IAEA.

In late 2015, the agency closed the PMDs file.³ US and European officials appeared content with the IAEA's conclusions. As Iran's official position was that it had never sought nuclear weapons, there was little reason to turn this issue into a public spat. Iran had, after all, put an end to military-related nuclear work well before the talks over the JCPOA started, and had agreed to measures – limits to its civilian

nuclear programme and an intrusive IAEA inspection regime – that would severely constrain its ability to pursue nuclear weapons in the future.

Here comes the *denial*: Netanyahu did not provide any evidence that Iran is in breach of its JCPOA obligations. When Europe, Russia and China say that the deal is working, they are not expressing an opinion but drawing a conclusion based on empirical evidence provided by IAEA inspectors as well as their national intelligence agencies.⁴

While the essence of Netanyahu's revelations – that is, that Iran *had* an ongoing nuclear weapons programme between 1999 and 2003 – was known already, smuggling the trove of documents out of Iran is an important intelligence achievement.

Had the Israeli government opted to share this information discreetly, the United States and the other parties to the JCPOA could have used the agreement's verification system to demand inspections in those sites mentioned by the documents.

Under pressure from all JCPOA members, who could have used the threat of a joint statement publicly blaming Iran of dragging its feet on the verification process, the Iranian government would have likely given in, granting access and more information. Against this backdrop, Israel's intelligence coup actually underlines

² National Intelligence Council, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities. National Intelligence Estimate*, November 2007, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS93622>.

³ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Statement on Iran by the IAEA Spokesperson*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.iaea.org/node/47747>.

⁴ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Iran Nuclear Deal Is Working and EU Will Ensure It Stands*, 21 September 2017, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/32552>.

the value of keeping the JCPOA verification system in place.⁵

So why did Netanyahu go public? This is where an assessment of Netanyahu's showmanship turns into *criticism*. The Israeli prime minister is opposed to the nuclear deal, as he fears it could eventually lead to a normalization of Iran's role in the region as well as at the broader international level. The pre-JCPOA situation, in which Iran had been reduced to a pariah state by international sanctions and isolation, is the ideal end game for Netanyahu, who is seeking to wind back the clock on Iran and return it to its pre-2015 isolation.

Netanyahu has found a sympathetic listener in US President Donald Trump. The US president hates the nuclear deal in part because his predecessor negotiated it, but also because he knows very little about its terms and is disinterested in the potential consequences of its collapse.

On 12 May, Trump is expected to take a decision on whether to extend a sanctions waiver pursuant to the JCPOA. After grudgingly granting the waiver a few times, this past January he eventually hinted that he was unwilling to do so again.⁶ This alarmed many in the administration and Congress, who worry that an unjustified failure to

suspend sanctions would have exposed the US to criticism for being in breach of its international obligations.

All Trump was lacking was a good excuse to argue that it is Iran, not the US, that is in breach of the JCPOA. Now, Netanyahu has given Trump that excuse. Mike Pompeo, a known Iran-hawk and newly appointed Secretary of State, has already openly endorsed this line of argument.⁷

Netanyahu's success would be more complete if Europe, which has desperately tried to convince Trump not to abandon the nuclear deal, were to give in to US-Israeli pressure and re-adopt its own sanctions against Iran.⁸ Fortunately, the Europeans' radar has functioned, and European states have avoided the trap – at least for the time being.⁹

Whether Europe will be able to defend the deal in the event of a formal US withdrawal remains an open question, as is Iran's willingness to stay in the JCPOA under such conditions. It is reasonable to assume that Iran will respond to a US pull out by at least partially resuming those nuclear activities that were banned by the deal.

Prime Minister Netanyahu will then have another stage built for himself,

⁵ Paul R. Pillar, "Netanyahu Makes the Case for the JCPOA", in *The National Interest Blogs*, 1 May 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/node/25646>.

⁶ Meredith Rathbone et al., "President Trump Reissues Iran Sanctions Waivers, but Warns That Concerns over JCPOA Must Be Addressed", in *Steptoe International Compliance Blog*, 16 January 2018, <https://www.steptoointernationalcomplianceblog.com/?p=1886>.

⁷ US Department of State, *Iran Atomic Archive*, 30 April 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/281345.htm>.

⁸ Anne-Sylvaine Chassany et al., "Merkel, May and Macron in Last-Ditch Effort to Save Iran Deal", in *Financial Times*, 29 April 2018.

⁹ Mark Landler, David M. Halbfinger and David E. Sanger, "Israel's Claims on Iran Divide Europe and U.S. on Merits of Nuclear Deal", in *The New York Times*, 1 May 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2FA947s>.

climb up high on top of it and, with his traditional mix of fake solemnity and conniving satisfaction ask the world, in his perfectly fluent American-English: Did I not warn you that Iran could not be trusted?

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