



## IRAN: THE BIG SELL

By Adam Garfinkle



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Over the past few days the Obama Administration has rolled out the big cannons to sell the Iran deal to a clearly nervous Congress. The main two salesmen-in-chief have been the President and the Secretary of State, the former by dint of a conventional speech, and the latter mainly through an interview with *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg. (Secretary Moniz went off to Chicago to bang the gong, but, for better or worse, no one pays much attention to him because he's not particularly charismatic and his formidable technical knowledge just makes most people's eyes glaze over.)

In some ways it is a peculiar show. The way the Corker-Carlin (or Corker-Menendez, if you like the original label) law is written—which turns the Senate's advise-and-consent function upside down and gratuitously sticks the House on for good, but probably unconstitutional, measure—the Administration should objectively have little to worry about. Both houses would have to override a Presidential veto to stop the deal, and given the regnant political geometry, that seems too high a hurdle to get over. But if that's so, why is the Administration rushing to the ramparts?

Well, several interconnected reasons seem either possible or plausible. The first is that Administration principals know the weaknesses of the deal and reason that if they do nothing while critics score points, they might actually lose the argument and the first vote—or at the least end up needing to use a veto to deliver the deal. That would be embarrassing and politically costly, so it's worth avoiding if possible.

Second, there is a possibility that Administration principals have an outsized Jewcentric fear that the "Jewish lobby", working with the Israeli Prime Minister, is actually powerful enough to derail the agreement. They might point privately, within the inner sancta, to the fact that Chuck Schumer, the influential Jewish Senator from New York, and Steven Israel, the most senior-ranking Jewish member of the House—both Democrats—have already come out against passage. So has David Harris and the board of the American Jewish Committee, an organization not generally known for kneejerk hawkish stances. We will return to the "Jewish" element in all this anon. Suffice to say for now that, if they really worry about this, they are delusional.

Third, let it not go unmentioned that the big push is simply expected of them. This is what Administrations do. This is part of the political process, and part of the benign required ritual of a deliberative democracy. All the noise is a natural and healthy aspect of a genuine policy discourse.

### I.

Except that there is something a little unhealthy, if not a bit fishy, about the "noise" of the past few days. The tone of the President's speech, part of it certainly, was unpresidentially shrill. It violated Sidney Hook's rule that a decent person first meet the arguments of his opponents before disparaging their characters. The President did not first meet and defeat the arguments of the critics. He first labeled the whole lot as, essentially, a bunch of neoconservative warmongers who gave us the disastrous Iraq War. His reference to "tens of millions of dollars in advertising" is especially noxious, as if opponents do not have a right to make their arguments, and as if Democratic politicians know nothing of political advertisements.

He then turned to the critics' arguments, which are all over the place. In some cases he merely asserted facts that, in my view, are not true. That does not mean he lied, anymore than Bush Administration principals lied about WMD stockpiles in Iraq before March 2003; someone can be both sincere and mistaken about something, after all, with no intent to mislead. In some cases his arguments hit home. Several others fell somewhere in between, which is to be expected when the subject is a complicated, somewhat technical, and hence a somewhat ambiguous can of worms. Let us take these three categories in turn.

So what did the President say that, in my analysis, is not true? He claimed the deal "permanently prohibits Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon", that it "cuts off all of Iran's pathways to a bomb", that "under its terms, Iran is never allowed to build a nuclear weapon", and that "Iran will never have the right to pursue a peaceful program as a cover to pursue a weapon, and in fact this deal shuts off the type of covert path Iran pursued in the past." How so?

Because the verification system will work to catch any significant Iranian cheating. The President asserted that, "Inspectors will be allowed daily access to Iran's key nuclear sites", that there "will be 24/7 monitoring of Iran's key nuclear facilities", and that access is guaranteed, "even if Iran objects", with "as little as 24 hours notice." He claimed, too, that, "Under the terms of the deal, inspectors will have the permanent ability to inspect any suspicious sites in Iran." And finally: "The prohibition on Iran's having a nuclear weapon is permanent. The ban on weapons related research is permanent. Inspections are permanent."

With respect to the broader implications of the deal, the President also spoke an untruth or two. One is the President's remark that the Bush Administration "did not level with the American people about the costs of war, insisting that we could easily impose our will on a part of the world with a profoundly different culture and history." The second untruth stands out in particular: "And by the way, such a strategy also helps us effectively confront the immediate and lethal threat posed by ISIL."

Let us now step back and address these claims.

It is difficult for me to square any of the President's claims that use the words "permanently" and "never" with a deal whose terms expire in ten, or fifteen, or in a few cases 25 years. Maybe I'm slow on the uptake, but I can't square the logic. Nor can I find the passages in the 159-page document that is the JCPOA deal that confirm these claims. If these statements are true by dint of side agreements between Iran and the IAEA, I would be surprised, but neither I nor the Congress has access to those side agreements—and it's not entirely clear that the President does either.

The fact is that Iran will be able to run some 6,000 centrifuges under the terms of the deal, it will be able to conduct research and development on various nuclear technologies, and it will be able to advance its human capital resources, as well. Increasingly as time passes, therefore, Iran will burnish its credentials as a nuclear-threshold state, so that by the time the deal expires its nuclear infrastructure, in many respects, will be far more advanced than it is today. The broader political implications of this fact are daunting: Rather than obviate a regional proliferation race, which the President yet again rightly stressed is the real problem here, it is likely to stimulate it. That is in the cards anyhow because the way the Administration approached the negotiations, by delinking them from Iran's broader regional behavior, stimulated enough anxiety among U.S. allies that they have already begun to vow efforts to achieve parity.

The claims about the foolproof capacities of the verification and inspection regime also strike me as wrong. I cannot find in the agreement any evidence that inspectors will be able to go anywhere they want within 24 hours. Note in this regard that on the same day that the President delivered the speech, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the IAEA inspector-general Yukiya Amano expressed frustration that the Iranian government is still stiff-arming the IAEA with regard to access to Iranian scientists. Meanwhile, Bloomberg reported that U.S. intelligence has evidence that the Iranians are now sanitizing, in broad daylight, a suspected nuclear site at Parchin. Why is this important?

The IAEA is now in the process of trying to resolve what is known as the PMD issue. PMD stands for "possible military developments" (not "past military developments"). Secretary Kerry promised in April, when the framework agreement was extracted from Wendy Sherman's whiteboard, that the PMD issue would be settled before any signatures attached to an agreement. That did not happen. It still isn't settled. The IAEA is supposed to report out on the PMD issue, by mutual agreement, on December 15, which is, please note, way beyond the period of congressional review. Again, why is this important? Because only if we know what past military activities the Iranians have been involved in can we establish a baseline against which to judge whether the deficiencies in the inspection/verification regime are acceptable on balance or not. So far, anyway, the Iranians show no willingness to settle this issue on acceptable terms, and cleaning up old messes seems designed to hide earlier military-related work from all possible means of intelligence exposure.

Now, it is all well and good that television monitors will be set up at Fordow, Nantanz, and other known facilities. But what will go in does not represent the best technical craft the IAEA possesses, and worse, by definition this monitoring cannot see what is going on at undeclared sites. There has never been a time over the past two decades when Iran has not been violating the NPT with covert work, a fact the President referred to and a fact that is responsible for seven Security Council resolutions censuring Iran. Unless we have powerful national technical means to see inside of Iran, well over and above what the IAEA can do, we won't know what we won't know. This is why getting the PMD portfolio settled properly is so important. But, alas, if the IAEA could not do its job before the deal while sanctions have been in place, it strains credulity to think that the Iranians will be more cooperative once the sanctions regime is gone. So the claim that "this deal shuts off the type of covert path Iran pursued in the past" seems to me untrue.

The Bush Administration "did not level" with the American people? This is really below the belt. As already noted, being mistaken is not the same as lying or not leveling. The key Bush Administration principals actually believed these things, although no one said, as far as I can remember, that "we could easily impose our will" on the Arab world. People, notably the President, spoke of "the work of generations." I agree with President Obama that this was a fool's errand, and have written as much many times over the past decade. But the insinuation that these errors were knowingly part of a con job of some sort is insufferable.

As to the new strategy helping the effort against ISIS, this is simply nonsense. The reverse is true.

ISIS arose from serial U.S. errors and ambient weakness and chaos in the region. Those errors include invading Iraq and shattering that state with no credible Phase IV and no Plan B in hand if things didn't go well, and they certainly didn't; then leaving too soon before social and political normalcy, or what passes for it in a place like Iraq, could be established; and, above all, passivity in the face of the Alawi butchery of some 200,000 Sunnis in Syria. ISIS arose to fight Alawis in Syria and Shi'a in Iraq; it was sucked into that vortex by fawning weakness not just in those states, but in the whole Sunni Arab world.

ISIS therefore is the radical Sunni pole that matches and feeds off of the radical Shi'a pole whose epicenter is Iran. Hence, ISIS has used fear of Iran and of Shi'a encirclement as its prime recruitment tool. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS's chief mouthpiece, has repeatedly warned of a Western plan to hand over the Muslim world to Iran. After the U.S. military seemed to act like the Shi'a air force, even sharing a base with a vicious Iranian-backed Arab-Shi'a militia, the Administration's deal with Iran will mightily reinforce this narrative. It's the best thing that's happened to ISIS and its recruiting effort since the Administration began its feckless, strategy-free air war against it, which managed to confirm the mantra that "the West is at war against Islam" without really hurting the bloody bastards all that badly.

## II.

What did the President get right? To be fair and objective, plenty. In general terms, he did not equivocate about how nasty and dangerous the Iranian regime is or about how justified Israeli concerns with it are. He hit all the right notes on both scales. He stated that "there's never been disagreement on the danger posed by an Iranian nuclear bomb", that military options remain to be used if necessary down the road, that "there are times when force is necessary, and if Iran does not abide by this deal, it's possible we don't have an alternative." Maybe the Iranians do not believe him, but that's now moot. The drama will not play out to that point while Obama remains in office. But I think these are fair statements, and I think that whoever becomes President in January 2017 will retain these judgments and this sense of obligation to use force if it comes down to that.

I therefore think the President is right to characterize the situation as either this deal or an ineluctable path to war. That is what I have been saying for many years now, and the President is absolutely right to say that the "send it back for renegotiation" ploy is just that: a tactical evasion and a non-starter.

He is also right to say that if the Congress votes the deal down the sanctions regime will be dead in the water. But it will disappear if the deal is consummated too. So either way, it's toast. The President is right to insist that sanctions alone, even were the full wall of constraint to persist, cannot stop an Iranian bomb. He is right, too, to claim that even more hurtful sanctions cannot be erected if this deal goes down, because it was the promise of a negotiated solution, or at least a full faith effort of the U.S. government to try for one, that enabled the sanctions regimes to be built in the first place. I wish he had avoided language like "are not being straight with the American people" and "are selling a fantasy", but on the merits he is right.

Finally on this score, the President is right to claim that no one has a better alternative right now. This is a point I have also made before: If you don't like the deal, what's your alternative? The alternative is indeed a high risk of war, and, as the President said, some are honest enough to say that it's a risk worth running under the circumstances. But when the President talks like this he undermines the credibility of his own claims to be willing to use force if need be. So this introduces us to the ambiguous.

### III.

And what about the ambiguous? Well, first, the President's claim that taking the diplomatic track is what got Hassan Rouhani elected President of Iran is mere speculation. Lots of things determine the outcome of elections in Iran, not least the absurdly narrow qualification criteria to be able to run. The President's remark that "the Iranian people elected a new government" seemed to bless Iran as a genuine electoral democracy, no different, really, from our own. This is odd, to say the least.

Second, the claim that the deal is better able to limit the Iranian effort to get a bomb than a military attack is hard to assess from both directions. As I have written before, the Iranians have any number of exit ramps they can take between implementation and 15 years from now. They can, in my view, cheat repeatedly at the margins without much fear of being forced to relent, and in such a way as to accumulate real militarily applicable assets, and then walk out of the deal after copping the financial benefits. Read paragraphs 36 and 37. Now, the President said that sanctions can snap back at U.S. insistence alone: "We won't need the support of other members of the UN Security Council, America can trigger snap back on our own." So Iran's financial benefits will be temporary and modest—that's the tacit argument here. Well, we can snap back our own sanctions but we cannot unilaterally re-impose everyone else's, which means the sanctions regime in its stronger form is not something we can bring back to life once it is deconstructed.

As to the other end, how much damage a military strike can do depends on the particulars of the strike. I would not trust this Administration to undertake an effective strike, given what its anti-ISIS campaign looks like, but other Administrations might do a much better job of planning and execution. Of course the President is right that "immaculate conception" strikes are impossible; the Iranians would respond and there are plenty of U.S. targets to hit, military and otherwise. Uncertainties and unanticipated consequences would abound, as always. But the categorical assertion that this deal will retard Iranian ambitions better than any conceivable form of military action strikes me as not proven, at best.

At one point the President claimed that people who criticized the November 2013 interim accord now use it as an excuse not to "support the broader accord." Maybe he knows someone who fits that description; I don't.

And finally on the ambiguity scorecard—which will serve as a segue to Secretary Kerry—the President claimed that the Iranians will "have to get rid of 98 percent of its stockpile of enriched uranium, which is currently enough for up to 10 nuclear bombs, for the next 15 years." Now this is a very slippery remark. It suggests that without the JCPOA the Iranians will be able to build "up to 10 nuclear bombs" essentially anytime they feel like it. Hold that thought while we visit the mind of Secretary John Kerry.

### IV.

Secretary Kerry made this same claim not once but three times in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg: "They didn't make the bomb when they had enough material for 10 to 12"; "They have mastered the fuel cycle; they have enough fissile material for 10 to 12 bombs"; and "They were really nudging into it. This was a dangerous place we were in. We were at two-months; we were at 10, 11 bombs-worth fissile material." Kerry characterized the deal not a preventative, but as a rollback. We have, he said, "the mechanism to get rid of nuclear weapons." And, "What we've done, and what no one else has succeeded in doing, is rolling back the program."

This is a very significant claim. Accepting the risks of JCPOA for buying time or arguably preventing an Iranian nuke is one thing; accepting them for actually achieving rollback of all-but-existing nukes is something else again—a significantly more attractive proposition. (To my surprise, Goldberg failed to pick up on the significance of what he was hearing.) But is any of this true?

I have been closely following this business for a decade or more, and I have never heard any American official—or any other official, for that matter—claim that Iran ever had or now has enough fissile material for 10, or 10-12, bombs. So what are the President and Secretary Kerry talking about?

The best answer I can give goes like this: The Iranians had a lot of LEU (low-enriched uranium)—in the 3 to 20 percent range—by 2011-12. To get 10-12 weapons out of that material would have required something called batch enrichment to hike it to a level of around 90-percent enriched—that's weapons grade. That is not easy to do. Besides, after Prime Minister Netanyahu did his September 2012 act at the UN General Assembly, displaying his famous Wile E. Coyote cartoon of the bomb with the line at 200 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium, the Iranians, according to the IAEA quarterly reports, down blended their 20 percent enriched stockpile to stay under the 200 kg limit. They were doing this, at least in part, *before* the interim JPOA was signed in November 2013. They may have been afraid of the Israelis at that point, if not of us. This means that they never got close to having what Kerry and the President suggest in their remarks.

So, is this a lie? A matter of technological ignorance? Both? Far be it from me to judge. All I know is that the statement is perhaps true in some sort of vague, general way; but it is not true as intended. The Iranians never had enough 90 percent enriched uranium for 10 bombs. The deal is not a rollback. It is at best a buy-time preventative, and should be judged against that achievement and nothing more.

One final comment about Secretary Kerry's interview. At one point in the conversation Goldberg asks about whether the Iranians would walk away from a prospect of Congress-forced renegotiation. Kerry answers: "I know they would walk away for several different reasons. It's not a 'think'—it's a 'know.' You need to talk to the intel community. You know, we had pretty good insight in the course of this process. Our evaluations out of the intel community informed us where reality was, what the market would bear."

This is not the first time Obama Administration officials have evoked classified material in public for political purposes. But it is wrong. It is always wrong to politicize intelligence like this, and it is disingenuous for Kerry to pull intel trump to make a public argument when those outside the SCI realm cannot judge for themselves what he's talking about. Earlier in the interview Kerry expressed a reluctance to come across like an analyst in answer to Goldberg's questions; he knows, at least, that doing so is not Secretarial. But using classified information in such a manner is far worse.

## V.

Now let's talk about the Jews. A rather inordinate amount of words got spilled by both the President and the Secretary about Israel. Why?

Well, as the President said, Israel's government is the only one that opposes the deal, and does so ferociously. This is a problem because Israel is a close ally, and it deserves special consideration. One does have to wonder about the specter of Jewcentricity, however. Just how much clout do Administration principals think "the Jews" really have? I cannot answer that question.

The whole business is quite troublesome, however, for lots of reasons. First, there are plenty of experts who think the Iran deal is a bad deal who are not remotely Jewish. Second, the disagreement poses real dilemmas to those American Jews who have deceived themselves into thinking that U.S. and Israeli interests and perceptions are always synonymous. They are not and never have been, but it's a comforting illusion and it's not so hard to believe in during normal times. But these are not normal times. This is a wrenching, divisive issue at a politically polarized moment in both Israel and the United States. Both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu bear responsibility for making a difficult situation much worse. It's at best a toss-up whether U.S. support for Israel can ever again be a non-partisan issue.

Secretary Kerry and the President both claim that Bibi is wrong, and that they know what's best for Israel better than he does. They say as much. They also claim not to understand his opposition to the negotiations, which sprang forth with all four paws bared in November 2013. The former claim reminds me of leftwing "progressive" consciousness-raising from the 1960s. The New Left types claimed to know what was in the best interest of laborers better than laborers themselves, even though the vast majority of these kids did not come from proletarian homes. I did, and so naturally they came across to me pretty clearly as a bunch of arrogant and obnoxious jackasses. Even if the President thinks he knows what is best for Israel, more so that its own democratically elected leader, it is not wise to say so publicly.

As to the second claim, well, there's no secret about the reason for Netanyahu's judgment as of November 2013, and in this most Israelis are of the same view. The November 2013 deal enshrined Iran's right to enrichment. That is the crucial concession that changed the purpose of the negotiations from where they started to where they have ended up. Now, the President and the Secretary posture as though it's the Holocaust that is to blame for all this anxiety and opposition. They

profess to “understand” and “sympathize” with this. They therefore raise themselves up to the status of amateur psychoanalysts, with Israel the one lying there on the couch. This is condescending in the extreme, and it also happens to be misleading sanctimonious bull.

Israelis, and Jews around the world, are worried because they see the unfolding of a regional proliferation nightmare all around them. It is irrational to think that once the Iranians had mastered the fuel cycle any negotiation could have undone that reality. I happen to think so, which is why I have argued over and over again that arms control diplomacy cannot significantly alter strategic realities, only modulate them a bit at the margins. For the Israeli government to have demanded the impossible, and then acted like a petulant child when the U.S. government could not deliver it, has not been pretty to watch. But Israeli (and Jewish) fears are not at base irrational and they are not tied to a Holocaust syndrome. Had there never been a Holocaust the objective situation right now and going forward would not be one iota different.

What Israelis and Jews are looking at is the possibility, just 10 or 15 or 25 years down the road—which is a few seconds in the long skein of Jewish history—that millions of Jews could be killed and the State of Israel rendered non-viable. What this means to thoughtful Jews is that the very continuity of the Jewish people would be called into serious question. What kind of future could the Jewish people have, and what could possibly be its character, after such a calamity? This is what is at stake deep in the hearts of Israelis and Jews, and for the President and the Secretary of State to fob it off as an irritating wisp of mere paranoia or irrationality is deeply unsettling, all the way, I think, to tragic.

VI.

The big sell will continue, as will the naturally partisan big thumbs down campaign, until the Congress votes on the deal next month. The vote tally is unknown at present, but it is unlikely that the Administration will need to exercise a veto to get its way. Even if it must, it is even more unlikely that a veto could be overridden. Thereafter, the gears of implementation will begun to churn, the debates will narrow onto how the IAEA is faring with the Iranians, and a great deal of leather-lunged simplification is bound to populate the campaign season ahead. And then what?

And then nothing very dramatic, for a good while. It will take time for the prognostications, optimistic or dire, to play out. It could take a decade or longer, or a mere few years. But by the time the bell rings for the next significant round, it will be another Administration’s problem, and no one can predict what the ambient political and strategic environment at the time will look and feel like. In a sense then, the Iran deal is a little like a space probe—something launched into not so much space but into time, into the future. Someone once said that the past is a foreign country. The future may as well be another planet.