



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 20, 2015

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How to Build a Nuclear Bomb Scare

Two days after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's much-anticipated March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress, a commentary by Fareed Zakaria appeared in the *Washington Post* under the headline "Netanyahu Enters Never-Never Land." Some of our nation's lawmakers might have taken that as an unflattering description of the Congress of the United States, but Zakaria was directing the Peter Pan analogy not at members of Congress, but at Netanyahu himself and the prime minister's strategy, as he described it in the House chamber, for bringing Iran to heel by forcing Tehran to dismantle nearly its entire nuclear program.



Netanyahu's appearance, arranged by House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) without consultation with either the U.S. president or secretary of state, was, to say the least, extraordinary. The Israeli prime minister stood in the U.S. Capitol and denounced, as everyone knew he would, an agreement under negotiation between the U.S. president and the leaders of Iran and, in so doing, received 40-some ovations. Indeed the Republicans were jumping to their feet and applauding so much that some likened the event to an aerobics class.

Foreign Policy Takeover

While some Democrats boycotted the speech, most attended and joined in at least some of the ovations, despite the fact that Netanyahu was pushing them toward what the *New York Times* called "an awkward, painful choice between the president of their country and their loyalty to the Jewish state." MSNBC talk-show host and Democratic partisan Chris Matthews was more blunt: "This was a takeover attempt by Netanyahu with his complying American partners to take American foreign policy out of the hands of the President."

Congress has, of course, foreign policy responsibilities of its own, including the power to declare war, which it has effectively surrendered, time and again, to the president. "It's a rare thing for Congress to declare war — and rarer still to do it at the request of a foreign leader," wrote Dana Millbank of the *Washington Post*, while conceding: "It wasn't literally a war declaration, of course, just symbolic applause from Republicans, and several Democrats, for Netanyahu's bid to scuttle U.S. negotiations with Iran."

Why? Well, because Netanyahu and much of Washington's political establishment insist Iran's nuclear program is dangerously close to producing nuclear weapons. And with "Bibi," it is always Nuclear Eve. "For almost 25 years now," wrote Zakaria, "Netanyahu has argued that Iran is on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon. In 1996 — 19 years ago — he addressed the Congress and made pretty



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much the same argument he made this week. Over the last 10 years he has argued repeatedly that Iran is one year away from a bomb." What was said long ago about Leon Trotsky (a Marxist theorist and the first leader of the Red Army) might now be said of Netanyahu. He must, indeed, be a far-sighted prophet, for all of his predictions have yet to come true.

The media shock over the Netanyahu speech is an indication of just how far the Israeli prime minister had overreached into American politics while a mere two weeks away from his own reelection in Israel. And claims about Iran's nuclear program, whether made openly or through carefully selected leaks to favored news sources, generally go unquestioned in the mainstream media. The alarmist view over the approaching danger of a "nuclear-armed Iran" has become part of the conventional wisdom, sometimes defined as what everybody thinks everybody else thinks. "Iran's nuclear program" and "Iran's nuclear weapons program" are phrases that are often used interchangeably, as though synonymous. Yet the only thing missing from the case against Iran's "nuclear weapons program" is evidence that it exists.

No Evidence? No Problem

Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Israel, which has an estimated 200 nuclear warheads, is not. The treaty explicitly affirms the "inalienable right" of all parties thereto to "develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes." Iran claims its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, including the production of nuclear energy and the making of nuclear isotopes for medical applications. Through numerous inspections over many years, the International Atomic Energy Agency has not found evidence that Iran has "weaponized" its nuclear program. In a National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 and another in 2011, all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies reported with "high confidence" that there was no evidence of nuclear bomb making — though the 2007 report did say the country once had a weapons program, but concluded it had abandoned it four years earlier. U.S. officials since then have been unable to cite any evidence that Iran is working on a nuclear bomb. And while Iran has enriched uranium to the level of 20 percent, no one claims they have yet approached the 90-percent level needed for a nuclear weapon — though Netanyahu has said for years that Iran would reach that level in the next few months.

"Are they trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No. But we know that they're trying to develop a nuclear capability. And that's what concerns us," said Leon Panetta, then the secretary of defense, in a February 8, 2012 appearance on the CBS News program *Face the Nation*. Two days earlier James Clapper, director of national intelligence, informed the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "We assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons."

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said on February 19, 2012 that whether Iran would choose to make a nuclear weapon was "unclear, and on that basis I think it would be premature to exclusively decide that the time for a military option was upon us."

Deadly Sanctions

By that time the United States and allied nations had been ratcheting up economic sanctions against Iran for more than a decade, based on speculation about what Tehran might do regarding nuclear weapons. During the Obama reelection campaign in 2012, presidential advisor Michelle Flourinay



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boasted that Obama “has led the international community in imposing the most crippling sanctions ever imposed on any country” on Iran. The following year Treasury Secretary Jack Lew said, “The sanctions applied against Iran are the most severe sanctions in world history.” That the sanctions would hurt innocent Iranians who have nothing to do with the regime’s nuclear program was and is well understood. That’s what they’re intended to do.

“The only thing that is likely to budge the regime is if they see or sense an existential threat,” said Britain’s Defense Secretary Phillip Hammond. “If the level of economic pressure starts to translate into potentially regime-threatening disruption and dissent on the streets of Tehran, then they may change course,” he said, adding, “We can definitely make the pain much greater.”

In her interview with BBC’s Persian broadcast on October 26, 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, “I am aware that, from time to time, certain sanctions can be difficult for totally innocent people going about their daily lives.... I think it [the sanctions] has put a lot of pressure on the regime, which is the first step toward, perhaps, getting some within the regime to look at each other and say, ‘Hey, come on. Why are we doing this to ourselves and to our people?’”

In October 2011, Senator Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) appeared on a Chicago talk show the day after FBI and Drug Enforcement Agency officials announced the foiling of an alleged Iranian plot to be carried out in Washington against the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States and possibly Israeli diplomats as well. “I think the declaration of war has already happened by Iran on us,” Kirk said while advocating increased sanctions against Iran. Asked if the sanctions would result in “taking food out of the mouths of the citizens,” Kirk replied, “It’s okay to take the food out of the mouths of the citizens from a government that’s plotting an attack directly on American soil.”

Given the history of covert activities, including assassination plots, by our own CIA, we can only imagine what Senator Kirk’s reaction might be if a coalition of nations had schemed to take food off his family’s table or from the cupboards and kitchens of his constituents in Illinois. His eagerness to promote hunger among Iranians as a weapon against their government calls to mind then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s reply in 1996, when asked if maintaining sanctions against Saddam Hussein was worth the death of, by then, an estimated half a million Iraqi children, age five and under. “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it,” Albright said.

The number of dead because of the economic embargo against Iran may be unknown, but certainly the sanctions have taken their toll, causing the most vulnerable members of the population to suffer. The results have included “shortages of life-saving medicines such as chemotherapy drugs for cancer and bloodclotting agents for haemophiliacs,” *The Guardian* of London reported in 2013. Iran’s oil trade and imports and exports of natural gas have been curbed, and the sanctions have rocked the country’s banking sector. The shortage of goods pushed the nation’s official inflation rate up to 20 percent, though some analysts think it’s actually higher. The nation’s currency has reportedly lost 80 percent of its value since the end of 2011, and the percentage of people living in poverty nearly doubled, from 22 to 40 percent.

Deliberately imposing such economic suffering on a nation might arguably be justified were that nation waging war against one or more of the countries wielding the sanctions — the P5+1, made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia) and Germany. Instead, the sanctions are imposed to force Iran to abandon its nuclear



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weapons program — whether or not it has one.

Selling to the Shah

Iran's nuclear ambitions were not regarded as a problem by the West prior to the Islamic revolution of 1979. On the contrary, the United States, France, and other Western nations were encouraging the Shah of Iran's plans for acquiring 23 nuclear reactors and were selling him reactors, other equipment, and fuel for nuclear plants. The United States stopped supplying Iran with highly enriched uranium once the Shah was overthrown. The new regime, under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, scrapped the plans for what it regarded as the Shah's expensive toys and initially took a dim view of nuclear power, even for peaceful use. Yet it was about that time that the world began to hear warnings of an imminent Iranian nuclear threat. In 1984, West German engineers visited the unfinished Bushehr reactor and, according to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, reported that Iran's production of a nuclear bomb "is entering its final stages." If so, Iran, which was then in the middle of what would be an eight-year war with Iraq, must have been producing a bomb for the purpose of never using it, since Iran used none but conventional weapons against Iraq, despite Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Iranians.

Sanctions against Iran began in late 1979 when a revolutionary mob, with the tacit consent of the government, stormed the U.S. embassy and held 52 Americans hostage. Mindful of the CIA-engineered coup in 1953 that overthrew the elected government and put the Shah back on the "Peacock Throne," the Iranians demanded the return of the dying Shah, who was then receiving medical care in the United States, to stand trial for alleged crimes against the people. They held the embassy and the hostages for 444 days, from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981. Apparently wishing to further humiliate President Carter, who had become the symbol of America's helplessness during the hostage crisis, the Islamic Republic waited until Reagan was inaugurated before releasing the Americans.

The new administration in Washington continued the support for Iraq in the ongoing Iraq-Iran war and worked to prevent any type of international assistance from reaching Iran. The U.S. objection in 1983 to the International Atomic Energy Agency plan to provide Iran with technical assistance for the completion of the nuclear reactor at Bushehr caused the IAEA to back away from the project. The Reagan administration also pressured France to deny Iran enriched uranium and Germany to stop construction work on the reactor. As Gareth Porter pointed out in *Manufactured Crisis: the Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, the United States "was openly violating a central provision of the international agreement it would later cite as the basis for condemning Iran for failing to live up to its international obligations: the Non-Proliferation Treaty." A key provision of that treaty states:

All the parties to the Treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

With its supply options limited, Iran began developing its own enrichment capacity. Whatever commerce it did have with other countries regarding its nuclear program would have to be done in secret to avoid having the transaction cancelled due to American pressure. That secrecy would then be cited by Iran's adversaries as an indication that Iran was conspiring to build a nuclear bomb. Another reason for secrecy, however, became apparent in 1997, when Prime Minister Netanyahu began citing Israel's 1981 strike on Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak as an example of what might happen to Iran's nuclear program.



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Still, the level of secrecy attached to the program was greatly exaggerated. When an IAEA report in August 2003 suggested that Iran might have been covering up enrichment as part of a nuclear weapons program, the Bush administration and major news quickly jumped to the conclusion that Iran had been carrying on a covert enrichment program “for 18 years,” a phrase and number cited repeatedly in major news stories. Considerably less attention was given to a key statement in the November 2003 IAEA report: “To date there is no evidence that the previously undeclared nuclear material and activities referred to above were related to a nuclear weapons programme.”

That the IAEA continued to find no evidence of an existing Iranian nuclear weapons program is all the more impressive in light of what Porter has described as unsubtle threats of harm to the agency’s relationship with its major donor nations if it gave what one U.S. official called “any hint of a whitewash of Iran’s weapons activities.” According to Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the agency from 2007 to 2009, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice passed the word that the United States could “treat the IAEA budget like that of the Universal Postal Union.”

More War Threats

In 2008, the Israeli Air force carried out a two-week military exercise over the eastern Mediterranean and Greece, using all 100 of its F-15 and F-16 fighter planes. During the exercise, Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz stated the threat plainly: “If Iran continues its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack.”

“After the 2008 exercise,” Porter wrote, “four different studies by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the CIA in 2008 and 2009 concluded that the [Israeli Defense Force] lacked the refueling tankers, bunker buster bombs and electronic warfare capabilities necessary to carry out a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.” For unlike Iraq, which had but one nuclear reactor, Iran has 17 nuclear facilities, including some underground sites. Given these facts, it is likely that the 2008 exercise and other threats of military actions were designed to spur the United States and allied nations to impose even harsher sanctions against Iran as an alternative to the threatened attacks. In May 2012, the House of Representatives by a vote of 401 to 11 adopted a resolution affirming a U.S. policy of preventing Iran from gaining not just nuclear weapons, but a “nuclear weapons capability.” The following month a letter to the president signed by 44 U.S. senators called for “significantly increasing the pressure on Iran through sanctions and making it clear that a credible military option exists.” And Obama himself in that election year promised in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that he would use “all elements of American power” to keep Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, including “yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency.”

Iran might also see a need to prepare for any contingency, including a possible attack by Israel or the United States — or both. Meir Dagan, then the recently retired chief of the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, warned in 2011 that Netanyahu’s “dangerous adventure” of threatening war with Iran could lead to a regional war, giving Iran “the best possible reason to continue the nuclear program.” The United States has also given Iran many an unpleasant “contingency” to consider.

In April 2003, with the United States in the early stages of a predicted “cake walk” in Iraq, CBS’s *60 Minutes* decided to take a look at what might lie ahead for Iran. Among those interviewed was Geoffrey Kemp, then director of regional strategic programs at the Nixon Center, a Washington think tank since renamed the Center for the National Interest. Kemp reflected the thinking of much of the Washington



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political establishment in his confident assessment of the U.S. influence on Iran at the end of the Iraq War. “We will be not only a major presence in Iraq,” he said. “We will be in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Oman. We’re all around them and we’re encircling them with the most extraordinary military power the world has ever seen assembled. They are very nervous about this.”

Nervous enough, perhaps, to want a “nuclear weapons capability,” if not the weapons themselves. They might even have expected the concept of a nuclear deterrent to be well understood by the nation that originated it. The world’s reigning superpower is, after all, the first nation to develop atomic weapons and, thus far, the only one to use them.

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