



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 4, 2015

Is Netanyahu “Crying Wolf” About Iran?

As Washington braced for the controversial appearance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (shown) before a joint session of Congress to discuss Iran’s nuclear program, the online publication [The Intercept on Monday published](#) a history of Netanyahu’s previous claims that Iran was about to produce a nuclear bomb. Going back nearly a quarter of a century, The Intercept noted that in 1992, Netanyahu, then a member of the Israeli parliament, warned the Knesset that Iran was only “three to five years” away from reaching nuclear weapons capability, and that the threat had to be “uprooted by an international front headed by the U.S.” Three years later, in his book *Fighting Terrorism*, he again predicted Iran was “three to five years” away from a nuclear weapon.



In a previous appearance before the U.S. Congress, back in 1996, Netanyahu warned of the “catastrophic consequences, not only for my country, and not only for the Middle East, but for all mankind,” if Iran gained possession of a nuclear bomb, adding “the deadline for attaining this goal is getting extremely close.”

In 2009, according to a U.S. State Department cable published by Wikileaks, Netanyahu, then a candidate for prime minister, told a visiting U.S. congressional delegation that Iran was “probably one or two years away” from nuclear weapons capability. Later that year, according to another cable, Netanyahu, back in office as prime minister, told another delegation of American politicians that “Iran has the capability now to make one bomb,” adding, “they could wait and make several bombs in a year or two.” In a 2010 interview with *The Atlantic’s* Jeffrey Goldberg, Netanyahu said, “You don’t want a messianic apocalyptic cult controlling atomic bombs,” adding, “that’s what is happening in Iran.”

Most memorably, Netanyahu appeared at the United Nations in 2012, with a poster of a cartoon bomb, drawing a line just under the wick to illustrate how close Iran was to producing a nuclear bomb. The fuse would be lit by the following spring or summer, he predicted.

All of this suggests that the Israeli prime minister has, as The Intercept headline puts it, a long history of “crying wolf” about Iran. But he is hardly alone in that regard. Predictions that Iran was on the verge of developing a nuclear bomb go back at least to 1979, when the Shah was still on the “peacock throne” and the United States, France, and West Germany were negotiating with his regime on a deal that would bring Iran 20 nuclear reactors. After the Shah was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution, the United States stopped supplying highly enriched uranium to Iran, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, at the head of the new government, condemned nuclear energy, as well as weapons and halted all nuclear



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projects.

Yet predictions that a nuclear threat from Iran was either imminent or but a few years away continued to abound. In 2011, the *Christian Science Monitor* published a timeline of those predictions, including one in 1984, made shortly after West German engineers visited the unfinished Bushehr nuclear reactor. *Jane's Defence Weekly*, a highly respected source of military information, quoted West German intelligence sources as saying Iran's production of a bomb "is entering its final stages." That same year, U.S. Senator Alan Cranston said Iran was seven years away from making a nuclear weapon.

Thirty-one years later, Iran is still — or perhaps again — on the verge of developing a nuclear bomb, according to what is being said repeatedly in Congress as well as by Netanyahu and others.

The United States and allied nations have for the past several years imposed severe economic sanctions against Iran to force a scaling back of a nuclear development program that Tehran insists is for peaceful purposes, including energy production and the making of nuclear isotopes for medical use.

A National Intelligence Estimate report of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies in 2007 found no evidence that Iran was engaged in a nuclear weapons program. Another NIE in 2011 came to the same conclusion. In testimony before a U.S. Senate committee in on January 31, 2012, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that while Iran could weaponize its nuclear program within "months, not years" he added: "We don't believe they have actually made the decision to go ahead with a nuclear weapon." In an unclassified report published a year later, the intelligence chief said that despite the progress of its nuclear program, "we assess Iran could not divert safeguarded material and produce a weapon's-worth of WGU [weapons-grade uranium] before this activity is discovered." In an interview with CBS's Charlie Rose Monday night, Clapper said only one man in Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, could make the decision to divert Iran's nuclear program to weapons production. "At this point he has not made a decision" to make a nuclear weapon, Clapper said.

Yet some in Congress seem to think we are, or perhaps should be, on the brink of war over weapons that apparently do not now exist and might not even be in the planning stages. By inviting Netanyahu to come before the Congress and repeat his warnings about Iran, Speaker John Boehner and House Republicans are indicating that they apparently believe that negotiations between Obama and Tehran officials will result in a weakening of sanctions without getting assurances that there will be no Iran nuclear bomb. It might be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Netanyahu's speech is surely intended to undermine diplomatic efforts and build support for a hardline stance against Iran that will likely lead to conflict. And if the negotiations fail, then what? On this week's *Fox News Sunday*, host Chris Wallace repeatedly asked that question of House Majority Whip Stephen Scalise of Louisiana, as the transcript of the program shows:

Wallace: But if the talks break down, are you prepared — it's a pretty straight-forward question, are you prepared to vote to take this country to war against Iran?

Scalise: I'm prepared to continue doing what we need to do to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. There's strong bipartisan support in Congress for increased sanctions against Iran.

Wallace: What about war?

Scalise: I think you've heard that. I think what we need to do is keep the sanctions going. The sanctions were working. You want to prevent war, you talk, talk, but you also have to back it up with actions. Increased sanctions, give us a better position. It's ultimately [to] achieve victory in this, and that is stopping Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. That has got to be a top priority of



this administration.

Scalise wouldn't say if he would vote to take the country to war against Iran, which is a pretty good indication that he would. Politicians have roundabout ways of talking about war without using that troublesome three-letter word, as President Obama demonstrated more than once when he was threatening Iran.

"Let there be no doubt: America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and I will take no options off the table to achieve that goal," Obama said in his 2012 State of the Union Address. Barely a month later, he granted an interview to *The Atlantic* magazine in which he again said, "All options are on the table," adding that the final option is "the military component." Appearing at the American-Israel Political Action Committee Policy Conference on March 4, 2012, Obama gave the "military component" added emphasis, drawing enthusiastic applause when he said:

I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. (Applause.) That includes all elements of American power: a political effort aimed at isolating Iran; a diplomatic effort to sustain our coalition and ensure that the Iranian program is monitored; an economic effort that imposes crippling sanctions; and, yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency. (Applause.)

Some would argue — indeed former Texas Congressman Ron Paul and others have argued — that by imposing "crippling sanctions" the United States and its allies are already waging war on Iran, even as the economic sanctions on Iraq resulted in the death of an estimated half a million children during the 1990s, something then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said was "worth it" if the sanctions would promote regime change in Iraq. And as Congress pondered President George W. Bush's path to war with Iraq in 2002, there again was Benjamin Netanyahu, with no doubts about Saddam Hussein's development of nuclear weapons.

"There is no question whatsoever," he [told a congressional committee](#), "that Saddam is seeking and is working and advancing toward the development of nuclear weapons. No question whatsoever." Recalling Israel's bombing of a nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, Netanyahu added: "And today the United States must destroy the same regime, because a nuclear-armed Saddam will place the security of the entire world at risk. And make no mistake about it, if and once Saddam has nuclear weapons, the terror network will have nuclear weapons."

And the rest is history — a too easily forgotten history, apparently. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq did not turn up those "weapons of mass destruction," but it did bring about the destruction of Saddam's regime and with it, the power vacuum in Iraq that opened the door in that country to al-Qaeda and has since given rise to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

As the leader of a sovereign nation that has had a long and enduring friendship with the United States, Netanyahu merits and has received a respectful audience in Washington. But neither his predictions nor his prescriptions has been a reliable guide to peace and stability in the Middle East.



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