

Can Trump unravel the Iranian and North Korean nuclear threats? Many believe the Iran nuclear deal is the more dangerous, writes Nehad Ismail. Critics of it are now blaming ex-President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry.

Writing in the National Review on 28th August 2017 John R. Bolton, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations said:

"Trump can and should free America from this execrable deal at the earliest opportunity".

I wrote two years ago that the deal was good only for Iran. Obama was in a terrible hurry to sign this messy deal and now the chickens are coming home to roost.

President Donald Trump campaigned against the nuclear deal and continues to criticize the deal but is still reluctant to take the next bold step.

The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has dismissed US demands for the UN's nuclear watchdog to inspect Iran's military sites, saying in a televised interview that "we will not accept anything by force."

His comments last week were a response to demands by US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect military as well as non-military sites in Iran, to check the country's compliance with a deal that curbs Iran's nuclear weapons program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions.

Haley's demand for increased access for IAEA inspectors in Iran came after she met last week with IAEA experts in Vienna, Austria.

Haley tweeted on 31st August: "If Iran rejects a valid request for inspections, then the nuclear deal is as they say 'merely a dream.'" At the time of writing it had received 358 replies 1,673 retweets and 3,992 likes

The Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was an international agreement hammered out over many months. China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, the US, the EU and Iran reached a deal in July 2015 and it was implemented in January 2016. The IAEA was supposed to have regular access to nuclear sites inside Iran and verifies that it is implementing its side of the deal; in exchange, the US, United Nations and European Union lifted nuclear-related sanctions. Every 90 days, the US President must certify that Iran is keeping up its end of the deal. Iran remains under multiple sanctions for terrorism-related activities. That was the theory but things are not going smoothly.

Let us first reprise what was wrong with the deal signed in July 2015.

The deal was said to allow U.N. inspectors to press for visits to Iran's military sites as part of their monitoring duties - a compromise between Washington and Tehran. Iranian media rejected such a demand at the time.

But access at will to any site would not necessarily be granted and even if so, could be delayed, a condition that critics of the deal are sure to seize on as possibly giving Tehran time to cover any sign of non-compliance.

During the negotiations in 2015 the US negotiating team had been the weakest link giving away more and more concessions whilst the Iranian team remained stubbornly firm. The Iranians were aware of the fact that both the then President Obama and his secretary of State John Kerry were desperate to sign a deal. In June 2015 news leaked that Obama had written letters to Iranian President Rouhani virtually begging him to sign a deal. Both Obama and Kerry were desperately seeking some kind of foreign policy success.

The Iranian leaders celebrated by announcing to their people that the world super powers had acknowledged Iran's right to become a nuclear power. Obama's advisors told him that such rhetoric was for local consumption. But this didn't alter the fact that Iran would squeeze more and more concessions from a weak US President.

Obama's weakness was starkly reflected in his refusal to take a tough stance against the Assad regime which is Iran's ally and client. According to Washington sources Obama was afraid any action against the Syrian regime would alienate Iran and derail the nuclear talks.

President Obama was rushing to sign a nuclear deal with Iran at any price. Iran's negotiators had won generous concessions from the Obama administration.

Many issues still remain unresolved

The Iranians had failed to provide satisfactory answers to several questions:

In March 2015 the IAEA asked about the possible military dimensions (PMDs) of their nuclear program. Iran refused to answer. No clear answer had been given during the June/July 2015 talks either.

According to reports the week after the agreement was announced, Iran had NOT agreed to allow unfettered, unlimited access and intrusive inspection of suspected sites military and non-military without prior consultations. Iran had said it would implement the Additional Protocol (AP) of the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but the supreme leader had balked at its implications, declaring inspections of military sites a red line.

Critics of the nuclear deal such as John Bolton former US Ambassador to the UN warned of Iranian concealment, cheating, delay and obstruction to defeat whatever is agreed in writing. Bolton even dismissed the "snapback" mechanism to revive economic sanctions as

questionable and would be subject to endless disputes and delays.

The Economist (Tuesday July 14th 2015) referred to "worrying differences between the detailed American account of what had been agreed and the far vaguer public interpretation of the accord by the Iranians. These were subsequently amplified by statements about "red lines" by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in which he appeared to reject key provisions of Lausanne, particularly those relating to inspection of suspicious sites".

However the Financial Times cautiously welcomed the deal:

"Iran has accepted unprecedented international control and surveillance over its nuclear programme as well as cuts in its uranium stocks and in the number of centrifuges. Yes, it might cheat. But the terms imposed by the US and the other members of the P5+1 group of leading powers will not make that easy".

Many in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia and Israel think that Iran will at some point in future become a nuclear threshold state, as a result of the P5+1 agreement. The lifting of sanctions will embolden Iran to escalate its funding to its proxies and continue its strategy of sponsoring and supporting terrorism.

As far as the Middle East was concerned Obama's speech celebrating the deal had not impressed or reassured the allies. Obama just repeated what he had been saying since 2013.

The New York Times reported on 25 March 2015, "Iran has increasingly resisted any kind of formal "framework" agreement at this stage in the negotiations, preferring a more general statement of "understanding" followed by a final accord in June, according to Western diplomats involved in the talks".

Iran has been dodging hard questions from day one. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported in early March 2015 that they had only achieved very little progress in investigating Iran's nuclear program, and had not yet been able to determine if all of Tehran's nuclear material was intended for civilian use. IAEA chief, Yukiya Amano was quoted as saying: "the IAEA was ready to accelerate clarification of outstanding issues over Iran's nuclear plans. The question was whether Iran would answer IAEA's questions". IAEA said the verification process was stalled as Iran failed to provide key information to the agency.

"Iran has yet to provide explanations that enable the agency to clarify two outstanding practical measures," Amano told the board meeting early March. Under an interim deal agreed between Iran and the world's major countries in November 2013, Tehran suspended certain nuclear activities in return for limited easing of sanctions, as all sides continue working towards a comprehensive deal.

According to Time Magazine (March 30 2015) "the US negotiating team presented to the Iranian team excerpts from highly classified Iranian documents that U.S Intelligence had obtained from Tehran's top secret nuclear program. The Iranians dismissed the evidence out of hand calling the documents "a fabrication". It was baffling that the US negotiators failed to probe this and insist on further investigation.

Why the US team did not refuse to engage further until a satisfactory answer was received? Observers are puzzled that Obama and Kerry kept quiet about this and pushed for a deal regardless?

Furthermore Iran has failed to provide convincing answers to several questions:

Iran had not agreed specifically to allow unfettered and unlimited access to Fordow and Natanz

plants by IAEA inspectors?

Iran had not agreed to allow unannounced intrusive inspection to take place and without delay or notice to any site it chooses?

IAEA monitors don't have access to every part of the program without obstructions (centrifuges, uranium machinery etc.)?

It is still not clear whether the verification procedures and mechanisms are adequate to detect any deviation or cheating by Iran?

The Orchid Office

One other important issue Iran has been dodging and had failed to provide satisfactory answers for was the "Orchid Office" activities. The IAEA discovered that the Fakhrizadeh's "Orchid Office" was responsible for developing mechanisms for generating nuclear explosions with the uranium. The Shahab 3 rocket was modified to carry nuclear weapons with 1200 mile reach. The IAEA wanted to know more about Mr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh who established the Orchid Office where weapons research was carried out. Iran refused to answer.

President Obama himself revealed some 8 years ago (Sept 2009) the existence of the Fordow facility for uranium enrichment. Why didn't the IAEA and USA negotiators insist that this plant is closed and dismantled?

No matter what kind of nuclear deal was reached, good, bad or indifferent, the Iranians claimed victory. Iranian opposition figures I interviewed are amazed at the Obama administration's naivety in adopting the Iranian perspective on the Middle East.

Iran is part of the problem, and has never been part of any solution.

Nehad Ismail is a writer and broadcaster, who writes about issues related to the Middle East from his home in London.