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Iran's Nuclear Fairy Tale

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Parallel to its diplomatic engagement with the P5+1 to resolve the nuclear crisis, Iran is engaged in a public campaign to persuade the media and public opinion of its narrative regarding the crisis, which in essence is a nuclear fairy tale. A dominant theme in this narrative is Iranian victimization and mistreatment by a bullying hegemonic West. The story Tehran tells repeatedly is that Iran is only trying to exercise its “legitimate rights” to a civilian nuclear program according to the terms of the NPT, yet the strong powers oppose this and continue to exert their aggressive influence on Iran, primarily through what Iran regards as “illegitimate” and “illegal” sanctions. Why illegal? Because – as the story goes – no proof has been produced that Iran is guilty of any wrongdoing in the nuclear realm.

Two sets of recent statements clarify the nature of the disinformation campaign and its blatant cynicism – and demonstrate the nuclear fairy tale well. First is a description of the situation recounted by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in an onstage interview with David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*, during the Munich Security Conference in early February 2015. In this interview, Zarif begins by saying that the objective of the nuclear negotiations is to “make sure that Iran’s nuclear program remains exclusively peaceful.” He then explains: “That means that Iran should, in fact, be able to exercise its right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, *because without it exercising that right, it’s impossible to make sure that it’s peaceful*” (emphasis added). The second condition is to lift all sanctions on Iran, which, as Zarif explains later in the interview, is the objective of the JPOA, if read “correctly.”

These are two rather odd conditions for ensuring that Iran’s program is peaceful, with no mention of the need to satisfy the IAEA probe into strong suspicions of Iran’s work on a military nuclear program. Yet Zarif’s answer is very simple: “Iran takes steps to reassure the international community that [its] program remains peaceful – and the reason I use the word ‘reassure’ is that over the last 10 years or more, Iran has been the subject of more IAEA inspections than probably any other country on the face of the Earth, and the

IAEA has yet to find *a single evidence* that Iran's program is *anything but peaceful*" (emphasis added).

Thus according to the narrative, the IAEA is unfairly exposing Iran (always the victim of unwarranted harassment) to unprecedented inquiries, without even a shred of evidence to justify them. This contrasts sharply with the situation in the real world, however. In fact, since the release in late 2011 of the full annex of IAEA suspicions about Iran's illicit military activities in the nuclear realm, Iran has stonewalled the IAEA investigation, with an ongoing refusal to allow inspectors entry into the military facility at Parchin and a missed IAEA deadline set last August, during the months of the P5+1-Iran negotiations. The latest IAEA report released in February clearly notes Iran's lack of cooperation with the Agency in this regard.

A second example of the narrative appears in an article by the ex-Iranian spokesman for the nuclear talks, Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, now based at Princeton University. In an op-ed in *USA Today*, Mousavian builds on Zarif's line of analysis, taking it to the next level of absurdity. Namely, Iran is not only the wrongly accused victim, but indeed the only side that should get credit for being at all flexible in negotiations with the P5+1. He spells out eight so-called Iranian confidence building concessions, arguing that these must now be matched by the international community through sanctions relief. A close look, however, reveals that some of these steps simply spell out the terms of the JPOA, in return for which Iran received sanctions relief. Moreover, the agreements mentioned by Mousavian regarding Arak and Fordow actually reflect P5+1, not Iranian concessions. Rather than insisting that both facilities be closed – as was demanded by the P5+1 only a short time ago – the negotiating powers backed away from those demands. But CBM number 5 is the most creative element in the fairy tale, where Mousavian notes Iran's "cooperation with the IAEA to resolve the Possible Military Dimensions issues (PMDs)." Following this list, Mousavian concludes by saying that "the onus is now on the other [side]." Not only is Mousavian's story of Iran's flexibility a distortion; it is worth recalling that in this negotiation the two sides are not on equal footing, nor do they have an equal responsibility to make concessions – Iran is the NPT violator.

When considering the Iranian nuclear fairy tale, what is equally, if not more disturbing is the fact that the P5+1 states have shown no inclination to directly discredit the narrative or seek to undercut its influence. However, the most important element of the narrative that should be firmly and publicly contradicted by the international negotiators is the claim that Iran has done no wrong in the nuclear realm. This is the key that would pave the way to all other demands. There is broad international consensus – as well as much evidence – that Iran has been working on a military nuclear program for years, and yet the P5+1 apparently prefer not to confront Iran on this. They claim that it is better to deal with the different elements of the program and not to force Iran to admit what it has done

wrong in the past. Some contend that since Iran's knowledge cannot be erased, there is no point in pressing them on the issue. But knowledge is of course not the point; after all, much information is on the internet, so does that mean the NPT is meaningless?

It is dangerous to avoid confronting Iran on weaponization – the single most important violation of the NPT, and the major justification for all that the P5+1 demand of Iran regarding dismantlement of its program. Admission of wrongdoing is of central importance for verification purposes, because in order to deal with future violations, it is important to know how a state has cheated in the past. But the P5+1 would be advised to take very seriously the power of narratives. As long as Iran is allowed to cling to its narrative unchallenged by the West, all of the P5+1 demands can be depicted as exaggerations on the part of the bullying Western nations. Undercutting the narrative would highlight the necessity of all the demands in order to stop a dangerous proliferator that seeks regional hegemony and has been lying and cheating its way to the nuclear weapons threshold.

In the war of narratives the first victim is very often the truth. But as the saying goes, you can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. One can only hope that people will stop fooling themselves that allowing Iran to fool them doesn't matter.

