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John Kerry

Iran Nuclear Accord Speech at the National Constitution Center

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Dick, thank you so much for a generous introduction. I'll say more about it, but I want to say good morning to all of you here. It is great for me to be able to be here in Philadelphia. I am delighted to see so many young people with us. I know school has started and I know the choice between coming here and sitting in class was a very tough one. We're glad you made the choice you did.

I am particularly grateful that Senator Lugar chose to come here this morning in order to introduce me and to reaffirm his support for this agreement. But I'm even more grateful for his service to our country over a course of a lifetime. As a former colleague of his on the Foreign Relations Committee, which he referred to in his introduction, I can bear witness that Dick Lugar is one of the true legislative pathfinders of recent times, with a long record of foreign policy accomplishments. And what he and Sam Nunn did is a lasting legacy of making this world safer. He is also someone who has consistently placed our country's interests above any other consideration, and he has a very deep understanding of how best to prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the wrong hands. He is one of our experts when it comes to that judgment.

So it is appropriate that the senator is here with us this morning, and I think every one of us here joins in saying thank you to you, Dick, for your tremendous service. It's also fitting to be here in Philadelphia, the home ground of this absolutely magnificent Center to the Constitution, the Liberty Bell, and one our nation's most revered founders, Benjamin Franklin.



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And I must say I never quite anticipated, but this is one of the great vistas in America, and to be able to look down and see Independence Hall there is inspiring, I think, for all of us here.

I would say a quick word about Ben Franklin. In addition to his many inventions and his special status as America's first diplomat, Franklin is actually credited with being the first person known to have made a list of pros and cons -- literally dividing a page in two and writing all of the reasons to support a proposal on one side and all of the reasons to oppose it on the other.

And this morning, I would like to invite you -- all of you, those here and those listening through the media -- to participate in just such an exercise.

Because two months ago, in Vienna, the United States and five other nations -- including permanent members of the UN Security Council -- reached agreement with Iran on ensuring the peaceful nature of that country's nuclear program. As early as next week, Congress will begin voting on whether to support that plan. And the outcome will matter as much as any foreign policy decision in recent history. Like Senator Lugar, President Obama and I are convinced -- beyond any reasonable doubt -- that the framework that we have put forward will get the job done. And in that assessment, we have excellent company.

Last month, 29 of our nation's top nuclear physicists and Nobel Prize winners, scientists, from one end of our country to the other, congratulated the President for what they called "a technically sound, stringent, and innovative deal that will provide the necessary assurance ... that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons." The scientists praised the agreement for its creative approach to verification and for the rigorous safeguards that will prevent Iran from obtaining the fissile material for a bomb.

Today, I will lay out the facts that caused those scientists and many other experts to reach the favorable conclusions that they have. I will show why the agreed plan will make the United States, Israel, the Gulf States, and the world safer. I will explain how it gives us the access that we need to ensure that Iran's nuclear program remains wholly peaceful, while preserving every option to respond if Iran fails to meet its commitments. I will make clear that the key elements of the agreement will last not for 10 or 15 years, as some are trying to assert, or for 20 or 25, but they will last for the lifetime of Iran's nuclear program. And I will dispel some of the false information that has been circulating about the proposal on which Congress is soon going to vote.

Now, for this discussion, there is an inescapable starting point -- a place where every argument made against the agreement must confront a stark reality -- the reality of how advanced Iran's nuclear program had become and where it was headed when Presidents Obama and Rouhani launched the diplomatic process that concluded this past July.



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Two years ago, in September of 2013, we were facing an Iran that had already mastered the nuclear fuel cycle; already stockpiled enough enriched uranium that, if further enriched, could arm 10 to 12 bombs; an Iran that was already enriching uranium to the level of 20 percent, which is just below weapons-grade; an Iran that had already installed 10,000-plus centrifuges; and an Iran that was moving rapidly to commission a heavy water reactor able to produce enough weapons-grade plutonium for an additional bomb or two a year. That, my friends, is where we already were when we began our negotiations.

At a well-remembered moment during the UN General Assembly the previous fall, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had held up a cartoon of a bomb to show just how dangerous Iran's nuclear program had become. And in 2013, he returned to that podium to warn that Iran was positioning itself to "rush forward to build nuclear bombs before the international community can detect it and much less prevent it." The prime minister argued rightly that the so-called breakout time -- the interval required for Iran to produce enough fissile material for one bomb -- had dwindled to as little as two months. Even though it would take significantly longer to actually build the bomb itself using that fissile material, the prime minister's message was clear: Iran had successfully transformed itself into a nuclear threshold state.

In the Obama Administration, we were well aware of that troubling fact, and more important, we were already responding to it. The record is irrefutable that, over the course of two American Administrations, it was the United States that led the world in assembling against Tehran one of the toughest international sanctions regimes ever developed.

But we also had to face an obvious fact: sanctions alone were not getting the job done, not even close. They were failing to slow, let alone halt, Iran's relentless march towards a nuclear weapons capability. So President Obama acted. He reaffirmed his vow that Iran would absolutely not be permitted to have a nuclear weapon. He marshaled support for this principle from every corner of the international community. He made clear his determination to go beyond what sanctions could accomplish and find a way to not only stop, but to throw into reverse, Iran's rapid expansion of its nuclear program.

As we developed our strategy, we cast a very wide net to enlist the broadest expertise available. We sat down with the IAEA and with our own intelligence community to ensure that the verification standards that we sought on paper would be effective in reality. We consulted with Congress and our international allies and friends. We examined carefully every step that we might take to close off each of Iran's potential pathways to a bomb. And of course, we were well aware that every proposal, every provision, every detail would have to withstand the most painstaking scrutiny. We knew that. And so we made clear from the outset that we would not settle for anything less than an agreement that was comprehensive, verifiable, effective, and of lasting duration.



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We began with an interim agreement reached in Geneva -- the Joint Plan of Action. It accomplished diplomatically what sanctions alone could never have done or did. It halted the advance of Iran's nuclear activities. And it is critical to note -- you don't hear much about it, but it's critical to note that for more than 19 months now, Iran has complied with every requirement of that plan. But this was just a first step.

From that moment, we pushed ahead, seeking a broad and enduring agreement, sticking to our core positions, maintaining unity among a diverse negotiating group of partners, and we arrived at the good and effective deal that we had sought.

And I ask you today and in the days ahead, as we have asked members of Congress over the course of these last months, consider the facts of what we achieved and judge for yourself the difference between where we were two years ago and where we are now, and where we can be in the future. Without this agreement, Iran's so-called breakout time was about two months; with this agreement it will increase by a factor of six, to at least a year, and it will remain at that level for a decade or more.

Without this agreement, Iran could double the number of its operating centrifuges almost overnight and continue expanding with ever more efficient designs. With this agreement, Iran's centrifuges will be reduced by two-thirds for 10 years.

Without this agreement, Iran could continue expanding its stockpile of enriched uranium, which is now more than 12,000 kilograms -- enough, if further enriched, for multiple bombs. With this agreement, that stockpile will shrink and shrink some more -- a reduction of some 98 percent, to no more than 300 kilograms for 15 years.

Without this agreement, Iran's heavy-water reactor at Arak would soon be able to produce enough weapons-grade plutonium each year to fuel one or two nuclear weapons. With this agreement, the core of that reactor will be removed and filled with concrete, and Iran will never be permitted to produce any weapons-grade plutonium.

Without this agreement, the IAEA would not have assured access to undeclared locations in Iran where suspicious activities might be taking place. The agency could seek access, but if Iran objected, there would be no sure method for resolving a dispute in a finite period, which is exactly what has led us to where we are today -- that standoff. With this agreement, the IAEA can go wherever the evidence leads. No facility -- declared or undeclared -- will be off limits, and there is a time certain for assuring access. There is no other country to which such a requirement applies. This arrangement is both unprecedented and unique.

In addition, the IAEA will have more inspectors working in Iran, using modern technologies such as real-time enrichment monitoring, high-tech electronic seals, and cameras that are always watching -- 24/7, 365. Further, Iran has agreed never to pursue key technologies that would be necessary to develop a nuclear explosive device.



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So the agreement deals not only with the production of fissile material, but also with the critical issue of weaponization. Because of all of these limitations and guarantees, we can sum up by saying that without this agreement, the Iranians would have several potential pathways to a bomb; with it, they won't have any.

Iran's plutonium pathway will be blocked because it won't have a reactor producing plutonium for a weapon, and it won't build any new heavy-water reactors or engage in reprocessing for at least 15 years, and after that we have the ability to watch and know precisely what they're doing.

The uranium pathway will be blocked because of the deep reductions in Iran's uranium enrichment capacity, and because for 15 years the country will not enrich uranium to a level higher than 3.67 percent. Let me be clear: No one can build a bomb from a stockpile of 300 kilograms of uranium enriched only 3.67 percent. It is just not possible.

Finally, Iran's covert pathway to a bomb will also be blocked. Under our plan, there will be 24/7 monitoring of Iran's key nuclear facilities. As soon as we start the implementation, inspectors will be able to track Iran's uranium as it is mined, then milled, then turned into yellow cake, then into gas, and eventually into waste. This means that for a quarter of a century at least, every activity throughout the nuclear fuel chain will receive added scrutiny. And for 20 years, the IAEA will be monitoring the production of key centrifuge components in Iran in order to assure that none are diverted to a covert program.

So if Iran did decide to cheat, its technicians would have to do more than bury a processing facility deep beneath the ground. They would have to come up with a complete -- complete -- and completely secret nuclear supply chain: a secret source of uranium, a secret milling facility, a secret conversion facility, a secret enrichment facility. And our intelligence community and our Energy Department, which manages our nuclear program and our nuclear weapons, both agree Iran could never get away with such a deception. And if we have even a shadow of doubt that illegal activities are going on, either the IAEA will be given the access required to uncover the truth or Iran will be in violation and the nuclear-related sanctions can snap back into place. We will also have other options to ensure compliance if necessary.

Given all of these requirements, it is no wonder that this plan has been endorsed by so many leading American scientists, experts on nuclear nonproliferation, and others. More than 60 former top national security officials, 100 -- more than 100 retired ambassadors -- people who served under Democratic and Republican presidents alike, are backing the proposal -- as are retired generals and admirals from all five of our uniformed services. Brent Scowcroft, one of the great names in American security endeavors of the last century and now, served as a national security advisor to two Republican presidents. He is also among the many respected figures who are supporting it.



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Internationally, the agreement is being backed, with one exception¹, by each of the more than 100 countries that have taken a formal position. The agreement was also endorsed by the United Nations Security Council on a vote of 15 to nothing. This not only says something very significant about the quality of the plan, particularly when you consider that five of those countries are permanent members and they're all nuclear powers, but it should also invite reflection from those who believe the United States can walk away from this without causing grave harm to our international reputation, to relationships, and to interests.

You've probably heard the claim that because of our strength, because of the power of our banks, all we Americans have to do if Congress rejects this plan is return to the bargaining table, puff out our chests, and demand a better deal. I've heard one critic say he would use sanctions to give Iran a choice between having an economy or having a nuclear program. Well, folks, that's a very punchy sound bite, but it has no basis in any reality. As Dick said, I was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when our nation came together across party lines to enact round after round of economic sanctions against Iran.

But remember, even the toughest restrictions didn't stop Iran's nuclear program from speeding ahead from a couple of hundred centrifuges to 5,000 to 19,000. We've already been there. If this agreement is voted down, those who vote no will not be able to tell you how many centrifuges Iran will have next year or the year after. If it's approved, we will be able to tell you exactly what the limits on Iran's program will be.

The fact is that it wasn't either sanctions or threats that actually stopped and finally stopped the expansion of Iran's nuclear activities. The sanctions brought people to the table, but it was the start of the negotiating process and the negotiations themselves, recently concluded in Vienna, that actually stopped it. Only with those negotiations did Iran begin to get rid of its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium. Only with those negotiations did it stop installing more centrifuges and cease advancing the Arak reactor. Only then did it commit to be more forthcoming about IAEA access and negotiate a special arrangement to break the deadlock.

So just apply your common sense: What do you think will happen if we say to Iran now, "Hey, forget it. The deal is off. Let's go back to square one"? How do you think our negotiating partners, all of whom have embraced this deal, will react; all of whom are prepared to go forward with it -- how will they react? What do you think will happen to that multilateral sanctions regime that brought Iran to the bargaining table in the first place? The answer is pretty simple. The answer is straightforward. Not only will we lose the momentum that we have built up in pressing Iran to limit its nuclear activities, we will almost surely start moving in the opposite direction.

We need to remember sanctions don't just sting in one direction, my friends. They also impose costs on those who forego the commercial opportunities in order to abide by them. It's a tribute to President Obama's diplomacy -- and before that, to President George W. Bush -- that we were able to convince countries to accept economic difficulties and sacrifices and put together the comprehensive sanctions regime that we did.



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Many nations that would like to do business with Iran agreed to hold back because of the sanctions and -- and this is vital -- and because they wanted to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. They have as much interest in it as we do. And that's why they hoped the negotiations would succeed, and that's why they will join us in insisting that Iran live up to its obligations. But they will not join us if we unilaterally walk away from the very deal that the sanctions were designed to bring about. And they will not join us if we're demanding even greater sacrifices and threatening their businesses and banks because of a choice we made and they opposed.

So while it may not happen all at once, it is clear that if we reject this plan, the multilateral sanctions regime will start to unravel. The pressure on Iran will lessen and our negotiating leverage will diminish, if not disappear. Now, obviously, that is not the path, as some critics would have us believe, to a so-called better deal. It is a path to a much weaker position for the United States of America and to a much more dangerous Middle East.

And this is by no means a partisan point of view that I just expressed. Henry Paulson was Secretary of Treasury under President George W. Bush. He helped design the early stages of the Iran sanctions regime. But just the other day, he said, "It would be totally unrealistic to believe that if we backed out of this deal, the multilateral sanctions would remain in place." And Paul Volcker, who chaired the Federal Reserve under President Reagan, he said, "This agreement is as good as you are going to get. To think that we can unilaterally maintain sanctions doesn't make any sense."

We should pause for a minute to contemplate what voting down this agreement might mean for Iran's cadre of hardliners, for those people in Iran who lead the chants of "Death to America," "Death to Israel," and even "Death to Rouhani," and who prosecute journalists simply for doing their jobs. The evidence documents that among those who most fervently want this agreement to fall apart are the most extreme factions in Iran. And their opposition should tell you all you need to know. From the very beginning, these extremists have warned that negotiating with the United States would be a waste of time; why on Earth would we now take a step that proves them right?

Let me be clear: Rejecting this agreement would not be sending a signal of resolve to Iran; it would be broadcasting a message so puzzling most people across the globe would find it impossible to comprehend. After all, they've listened as we warned over and over again about the dangers of Iran's nuclear program. They've watched as we spent two years forging a broadly accepted agreement to rein that program in. They've nodded their heads in support as we have explained how the plan that we have developed will make the world safer.

Who could fairly blame them for not understanding if we suddenly switch course and reject the very outcome we had worked so hard to obtain? And not by offering some new and viable alternative, but by offering no alternative at all.



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It is hard to conceive of a quicker or more self-destructive blow to our nation's credibility and leadership -- not only with respect to this one issue, but I'm telling you across the board -- economically, politically, militarily, and even morally. We would pay an immeasurable price for this unilateral reversal.

Friends, as Dick mentioned in his introduction, I have been in public service for many years and I've been called on to make some difficult choices in that course of time. There are those who believe deciding whether or not to support the Iran agreement is just such a choice. And I respect that and I respect them.

But I also believe that because of the stringent limitations on Iran's program that are included in this agreement that I just described, because of where that program was headed before our negotiations began and will head again if we walk away, because of the utter absence of a viable alternative to this plan that we have devised, the benefits of this agreement far outweigh any potential drawbacks. Certainly, the goal of preventing Iran from having a nuclear weapon is supported across our political spectrum and it has the backing of countries on every continent. So what then explains the controversy that has persisted in this debate?

A big part of the answer, I think, is that even before the ink on the agreement was dry, we started being bombarded by myths about what the agreement will and won't do, and that bombardment continues today.

The first of these myths is that the deal is somehow based on trust or a naive expectation that Iran is going to reverse course on many of the policies it's been pursuing internationally. Critics tell us over and over again, "You can't trust Iran." Well, guess what? There is not a single sentence, not a single paragraph in this whole agreement that depends on promises or trust, not one. The arrangement that we worked out with Tehran is based exclusively on verification and proof. That's why the agreement is structured the way it is; that's why sanctions relief is tied strictly to performance; and it is why we have formulated the most far-reaching monitoring and transparency regime ever negotiated.

Those same critics point to the fact that two decades ago, the United States reached a nuclear framework with North Korea that didn't accomplish what it set out to do. And we're told we should have learned a lesson from that. Well, the truth is we did learn a lesson.

The agreement with North Korea was four pages and only dealt with plutonium. Our agreement with Iran runs 159 detailed pages, applies to all of Tehran's potential pathways to a bomb, and is specifically grounded in the transparency rules of the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which didn't even exist two decades ago when the North Korea deal was made because it was developed specifically with the North Korea experience in mind.

Lesson learned.



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The reality is that if we trusted Iran or thought that it was about to become more moderate, this agreement would be less necessary than it is. But we don't. We would like nothing more than to see Iran act differently, but not for a minute are we counting on it.

Iran's support for terrorist groups and its contributions to sectarian violence are not recent policies. They reflect the perceptions of its leaders about Iran's long-term national interests and there are no grounds for expecting those calculations to change in the near future. That is why we believe so strongly that every problem in the Middle East -- every threat to Israel and to our friends in the region -- would be more dangerous if Iran were permitted to have a nuclear weapon. That is the inescapable bottom line.

That's also why we are working so hard and so proactively to protect our interests and those of our allies. In part because of the challenge posed by Iran, we have engaged in an unprecedented level of military, intelligence, and security cooperation with our friend and ally Israel. We are determined to help our ally address new and complex security threats and to ensure its qualitative military edge.

We work with Israel every day to enforce sanctions and prevent terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hizballah from obtaining the financing and the weapons that they seek -- whether from Iran or from any other source. And we will stand with Israel to stop its adversaries from once again launching deadly and unprovoked attacks against the Israeli people.

Since 2009, we have provided 20 billion dollars in foreign military financing to Israel, more than half of what we have given to nations worldwide. Over and above that, we have invested some three billion in the production and deployment of Iron Dome batteries and other missile defense programs and systems.

And we saw how in the last Gaza War lives were saved in Israel because of it. We have given privileged access to advanced military equipment such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter; Israel is the only nation in the Middle East to which the United States has sold this fifth-generation aircraft. The President recently authorized a massive arms resupply package, featuring penetrating munitions and air-to-air missiles.

And we hope soon to conclude a new memorandum of understanding -- a military assistance plan that will guide our intensive security cooperation through the next decade.

And diplomatically, our support for Israel also remains rock solid as we continue to oppose every effort to delegitimize the Jewish state, or to pass biased resolutions against it in international bodies.



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Now, I understand -- I understand personally there is no way to overstate the concern in Israel about Iran and about the potential consequences that this agreement -- or rejecting this agreement -- might have on Israel's security. The fragility of Israel's position has been brought home to me on every one of the many trips I have made to that country.

In fact, as Secretary of State, I have already traveled to Israel more than a dozen times, spending the equivalent of a full month there -- even ordering my plane to land at Ben Gurion Airport when commercial air traffic had been halted during the last Gaza War; doing so specifically as a sign of support.

Over the years, I have walked through Yad Vashem, a living memorial to the 6 million lost, and I have felt in my bones the unfathomable evil of the Holocaust and the undying reminder never to forget.

I have climbed inside a shelter at Kiryat Shmona where children were forced to leave their homes and classrooms to seek refuge from Katyusha rockets.

I visited Sderot and witnessed the shredded remains of homemade missiles from Gaza -- missiles fired with no other purpose than to sow fear in the hearts of Israeli families.

I have piloted an Israeli jet out of Ovda Airbase and observed first-hand the tininess of Israel airspace from which it is possible to see all of the country's neighbors at the same time.

And I have bowed my head at the Western Wall and offered my prayer for peace -- peace for Israel, for the region, and for the world.

I take a back seat to no one in my commitment to the security of Israel, a commitment I demonstrated through my 28-plus years in the Senate. And as Secretary of State, I am fully conscious of the existential nature of the choice Israel must make. I understand the conviction that Israel, even more than any other country, simply cannot afford a mistake in defending its security. And while I respectfully disagree with Prime Minister Netanyahu about the benefits of the Iran agreement, I do not question for an instant the basis of his concern or that of any Israeli.

But I am also convinced, as is President Obama, our senior defense and military leaders, and even many former Israeli military and intelligence officials, that this agreement puts us on the right path to prevent Iran from ever getting a nuclear weapon. The people of Israel will be safer with this deal, and the same is true for the people throughout the region.

And to fully ensure that, we are also taking specific and far-reaching steps to coordinate with our friends from the Gulf states. President Obama hosted their leaders at Camp David earlier this year. I visited with them in Doha last month. And later this week, we will welcome King Salman of Saudi Arabia to Washington.



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Gulf leaders share our profound concerns about Iran's policies in the Middle East, but they're also alarmed by Iran's nuclear program. We must and we will respond on both fronts. We will make certain that Iran lives up to its commitments under the nuclear agreement, and we will continue strengthening our security partnerships.

We're determined that our Gulf friends will have the political and the military support that they need, and to that end, we are working with them to develop a ballistic missile defense for the Arabian Peninsula, provide special operations training, authorize urgently required arms transfers, strengthen cyber security, engage in large-scale military exercises, and enhance maritime interdiction of illegal Iranian arms shipments. We are also deepening our cooperation and support in the fight against the threat posed to them, to us, and to all civilization by the forces of international terror, including their surrogates and their proxies.

Through these steps and others, we will maintain international pressure on Iran. United States sanctions imposed because of Tehran's support for terrorism and its human rights record -- those will remain in place, as will our sanctions aimed at preventing the proliferation of ballistic missiles and transfer of conventional arms. The UN Security Council prohibitions on shipping weapons to Hezbollah, the Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthi rebels in Yemen -- all of those will remain as well.

We will also continue to urge Tehran to provide information regarding an American who disappeared in Iran several years ago, and to release the U.S. citizens its government has unjustly imprisoned.² We will do everything we can to see that our citizens are able to safely return to where they belong -- at home and with their families.

Have no doubt: The United States will oppose Iran's destabilizing policies with every national security tool available. And disregard the myth. The Iran agreement is based on proof, not trust. And in a letter that I am sending to all the members of Congress today, I make clear the Administration's willingness to work with them on legislation to address shared concerns about regional security consistent with the agreement that we have worked out with our international partners.

This brings us to the second piece of fiction: that this deal would somehow legitimize Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. I keep hearing this. Well, yes, for years Iran has had a civilian nuclear program. Under the Nonproliferation Treaty, you can do that. It was never a realistic option to change that. But recognizing this reality is not the same as legitimizing the pursuit of a nuclear weapon. In fact, this agreement does the exact opposite. Under IAEA safeguards, Iran is prohibited from ever pursuing a nuclear weapon.

This is an important point, so I want to be sure that everyone understands: The international community is not telling Iran that it can't have a nuclear weapon for 15 years. We are telling Iran that it can't have a nuclear weapon, period. There is no magic moment 15, 20, or 25 years from now when Iran will suddenly get a pass from the mandates of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty -- doesn't happen.



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In fact, Iran is required by this agreement to sign up to and abide by the IAEA Additional Protocol that I mentioned earlier that came out of the North Korea experience. And that requires inspections of all nuclear facilities.

What does this mean? It means that Iran's nuclear program will remain subject to regular inspections forever. Iran will have to provide access to all of its nuclear facilities forever. Iran will have to respond promptly to requests for access to any suspicious site forever. And if Iran at any time -- at any time -- embarks on nuclear activities that are incompatible with a wholly peaceful program, it will be in violation of the agreement forever. We will know of that violation right away and we will retain every option we now have to respond, whether diplomatically or through a return to sanctions or by other means. In short, this agreement gives us unprecedented tools and all the time we need to hold Iran accountable for its choices and actions.

Now, it's true some of the special additional restrictions that we successfully negotiated, those begin to ease after a period -- in some cases 10 or 15, in others 20 or 25. But it would defy logic to vote to kill the whole agreement -- with all of the permanent NPT restrictions by which Iran has to live -- for that reason. After all, if your house is on fire, if it's going up in flames, would you refuse to extinguish it because of the chance that it might be another fire in 15 years? Obviously, not. You'd put out the fire and you'd take advantage of the extra time to prepare for the future.

My friends, it just doesn't make sense to conclude that we should vote "no" now because of what might happen in 15 years -- thereby guaranteeing that what might happen in 15 years will actually begin to happen now. Because if this agreement is rejected, every possible reason for worry in the future would have to be confronted now, immediately, in the months ahead. Once again and soon, Iran would begin advancing its nuclear program. We would lose the benefit of the agreement that contains all these restrictions, and it would give a green light to everything that we're trying to prevent. Needless to say, that is not the outcome that we want, it is not an outcome that would be good for our country, nor for our allies or for the world

There is a third myth -- a quick one, a more technical one -- that Iran could, in fact, get away with building a covert nuclear facility because the deal allows a maximum of 24 days to obtain access to a suspicious site. Well, in truth, there is no way in 24 days, or 24 months, 24 years for that matter, to destroy all the evidence of illegal activity that has been taking place regarding fissile material. Because of the nature of fissile materials and their relevant precursors, you can't eliminate the evidence by shoving it under a mattress, flushing it down a toilet, carting it off in the middle of the night. The materials may go, but the telltale traces remain year after year after year. And the 24 days is the outside period of time during which they must allow access.



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Under the agreement, if there is a dispute over access to any location, the United States and our European allies have the votes to decide the issue. And once we have identified a site that raises questions, we will be watching it continuously until the inspectors are allowed in.

Let me underscore that: The United States and the international community will be monitoring Iran nonstop. And you can bet that if we see something, we will do something. The agreement gives us a wide range of enforcement tools, and we will use them. And the standard we will apply can be summed up in two words: zero tolerance. There is no way to guarantee that Iran will keep its word. That's why this isn't based on a promise or trust. But we can guarantee that if Iran decides to break the agreement, it will regret breaking any promise that it has made.

Now, there are many other myths circulating about the agreement, but the last one that I'm going to highlight is just economic. And it's important. The myth that sanctions relief that Iran will receive is somehow both too generous and too dangerous.

Now, obviously, the discussions that concluded in Vienna, like any serious negotiation, involved a quid pro quo. Iran wanted sanctions relief; the world wanted to ensure a wholly peaceful nature of Iran's program. So without the tradeoff, there could have been no deal and no agreement by Iran to the constraints that it has accepted -- very important constraints.

But there are some who point to sanctions relief as grounds to oppose the agreement. And the logic is faulty for several reasons. First, the most important is that absent new violations by Iran the sanctions are going to erode regardless of what we do. It's an illusion for members of Congress to think that they can vote this plan down and then turn around and still persuade countries like China, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, India -- Iran's major oil customers -- they ought to continue supporting the sanctions that are costing them billions of dollars every year. That's not going to happen.

And don't forget that the money that has been locked up as the result of sanctions is not sitting in some American bank under U.S. control. The money is frozen and being held in escrow by countries with which Iran has had commercial dealings. We don't have that money. We can't control it. It's going to begin to be released anyway if we walk away from this agreement.

Remember, as well, that the bulk of the funds Iran will receive under the sanctions relief are already spoken for and they are dwarfed by the country's unmet economic needs. Iran has a crippled infrastructure, energy infrastructure. It's got to rebuild it to be able to pump oil. It has an agriculture sector that's been starved for investment, massive pension obligations, significant foreign reserves that are already allocated to foreign-led projects, and a civilian population that is sitting there expecting that the lifting of sanctions is going to result in a tangible improvement in the quality of their lives.



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The sanctions relief is not going to make a significant difference in what Iran can do internationally -- never been based on money. Make no mistake, the important thing about this agreement is not what it will enable Iran to do, but what it will stop Iran from doing -- and that is the building of a nuclear weapon.

Before closing, I want to comment on the nature of the debate which we are currently engaged in. Some have accused advocates of the Iran agreement -- including me -- of conjuring up frightening scenarios to scare listeners into supporting it.

Curiously, this allegation comes most often from the very folks who have been raising alarms about one thing or another for years.

The truth is that if this plan is voted down, we cannot predict with certainty what Iran will do. But we do know what Iran says it will do and that is begin again to expand its nuclear activities. And we know that the strict limitations that Iran has accepted will no longer apply because there will no longer be any agreement. Iran will then be free to begin operating thousands of other advanced and other centrifuges that would otherwise have been mothballed; they'll be free to expand their stockpile of low-enriched uranium, rebuild their stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, free to move ahead with the production of weapons-grade plutonium, free to go forward with weaponization research.

And just who do you think is going to be held responsible for all of this? Not Iran -- because Iran was preparing to implement the agreement and will have no reason whatsoever to return to the bargaining table. No, the world will hold accountable the people who broke with the consensus, turned their backs on our negotiating partners, and ignored the counsel of top scientists and military leaders. The world will blame the United States. And so when those same voices that accuse us of scaremongering now begin suddenly to warn, oh, wow, Iran's nuclear activities are once again out of control and must at all costs be stopped -- what do you think is going to happen?

The pressure will build, my friends. The pressure will build for military action. The pressure will build for the United States to use its unique military capabilities to disrupt Iran's nuclear program, because negotiating isn't going to work because we've just tried it. President Obama has been crystal clear that we will do whatever is necessary to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. But the big difference is, at that point, we won't have the world behind us the way we do today. Because we rejected the fruits of diplomacy, we will be held accountable for a crisis that could have been avoided but instead we will be deemed to have created.

So my question is: Why in the world would we want to put ourselves in that position of having to make that choice -- especially when there is a better choice, a much more broadly supported choice? A choice that sets us on the road to greater stability and security but that doesn't require us to give up any option at all today.



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So here is the decision that we are called on to make. To vote down this agreement is to solve nothing because none of the problems that we are concerned about will be made easier if it is rejected; none of them -- not Iran's nuclear program, not Iran's support for terrorism or sectarian activities, not its human rights record, and not its opposition to Israel. To oppose this agreement is -- whether intended or not -- to recommend in its policy a policy of national paralysis. It is to take us back directly to the very dangerous spot that we were in two years ago, only to go back there devoid of any realistic plan or option.

By contrast, the adoption and implementation of this agreement will cement the support of the international community behind a plan to ensure that Iran does not ever acquire or possess a nuclear weapon. In doing so it will remove a looming threat from a uniquely fragile region, discourage others from trying to develop nuclear arms, make our citizens and our allies safer, and reassure the world that the hardest problems can be addressed successfully by diplomatic means.

At its best, American foreign policy, the policy of the United States combines immense power with clarity of purpose, relying on reason and persuasion whenever possible. As has been demonstrated many times, our country does not shy from the necessary use of force, but our hopes and our values push us to explore every avenue for peace. The Iran deal reflects our determination to protect the interests of our citizens and to shield the world from greater harm. But it reflects as well our knowledge that the firmest foundation for security is built on mobilizing countries across the globe to defend -- actively and bravely -- the rule of law.

In September 228 years ago, Benjamin Franklin rose in the great city of Philadelphia, right down there, to close debate on the proposed draft of the Constitution of the United States. He told a rapt audience that when people of opposing views and passions are brought together, compromise is essential and perfection from the perspective of any single participant is not possible. He said that after weighing carefully the pros and cons of that most historic debate, he said the following: "I consent, sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best."

My fellow citizens, I have had the privilege of serving our country in times of peace and in times of war, and peace is better. I've seen our leaders act with incredible foresight and also seen them commit tragic errors by plunging into conflicts without sufficient thought about the consequences.

Like old Ben Franklin, I can claim and do claim no monopoly on wisdom, and certainly nothing can compare to the gravity of the debate of our founding fathers over our nation's founding documents. But I believe, based on a lifetime's experience, that the Iran nuclear agreement is a hugely positive step at a time when problem solving and danger reduction have rarely been so urgent, especially in the Middle East.



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The Iran agreement is not a panacea for the sectarian and extremist violence that has been ripping that region apart. But history may judge it a turning point, a moment when the builders of stability seized the initiative from the destroyers of hope, and when we were able to show, as have generations before us, that when we demand the best from ourselves and insist that others adhere to a similar high standard -- when we do that, we have immense power to shape a safer and a more humane world. That's what this is about and that's what I hope we will do in the days ahead.

Thank you very much.

¹ Israel. See esp. PM Benjamin Netanyahu's 2015 Joint Session of Congress Address on Iran and the Nuclear Accord

² Publicly identified, current prisoners include Christian convert and pastor Saeed Abedini; Marine veteran and military contractor Amir Mirza Hekmati; private investigator and former intelligence U.S. Intelligence agent Robert Alan Levinson; and Washington Post reporter and bureau chief Jason Rezaian.