



**MAY:** David Albright is a physicist, a former nuclear inspector for the International Atomic Energy Agency, an expert on nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation, and the founder and president of the Institute for Science and International Security, also known as the "Good ISIS."

He has an important new book out, *Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons*. It's based on the secret archive of the nuclear weapons program of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Israeli spies located that archive in a warehouse in Tehran and spirited much of it out of the country. What David Albright has to tell us in his book is alarming and should have a significant impact on the policies of the Biden administration vis a vis Iran's rulers.

David is with us today, as is Andrea Stricker who worked with him at the "Good ISIS" for 12 years and who is now a fellow FDD where she conducts research on nuclear weapons proliferation and illicit procurement networks. We're pleased you're with us too, here on *Foreign Podicy*.

David, thanks for taking the time to talk to us. Andrea, always good to talk with you. So, look, here's one of the things I think people find complicated, okay—Iran's rulers have never acknowledged that they have nuclear ambitions. They say they just want nuclear power to air condition hospitals in the summer and heat schools in the winter. They don't want to burn too much oil.

Then people hear or read that the Supreme Leader has issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons, doesn't like them. Then hear that, "Okay, maybe in the past Iran's rulers wanted nukes, but not now." Then they hear that regime hardliners want nukes but there are moderates in the regime who would rather have a good economy and better lives for average Iranians. Then they that the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency says it just wants to have full confidence that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful. So that sounds like the IAEA isn't sure, but these messages or these memes or whatever you call them, they're not really based on the evidence. Certainly not the evidence you've in-depth examined based in reality.

**ALBRIGHT:** No, they're not. Iran has taken the position to just consistently deny ever having had nuclear weapons program or intending to have a nuclear weapons program. This lie convinces a lot of people, and you mentioned the Supreme Leader's fatwa. That fatwa, in analyzing the chronology of it, kind of fits in with a scenario that in 2003 Iran was in a sense caught and was very nervous about the impact of U.S. troops in Iraq, U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and it decided to not build nuclear weapons as it originally intended and to try to hide evidence of that, while at the same time preserving that program.

The fatwa came out in, from my understanding in 2003, 2004, and I see it as part of the coverup. This was a program that had a great deal of consensus among the leadership. Rouhani, the current president, was there at the birth of this crash nuclear weapons program in the late 1990s as the National Security Advisor for the Supreme Leader. The Defense Minister at the time, Shamkhani, now is the National Security Advisor to the Supreme Leader.

So, you have a great deal of continuity covering hardliners and what would be called moderates behind this program. I think part of the key to the solution, and it's just part of the key, is robust International Atomic Energy Agency inspections. That they have the tools and the experience to try to hammer open this really tough nut, to expose Iran's nuclear weapons program. That has been a very frustrating process for the inspectors, and it's not getting the kind of support from the international community, and particularly even the Biden administration, that it deserves.



June 15, 2021

Featuring David Albright and Andrea Stricker

Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

**MAY:** I want to come back to it. Let's get a little bit more history. You talked about 2003 and just to remind people, U.S. troops were in Afghanistan, U.S. troops were in Iraq. So, this was not a matter of diplomatic persuasion. The Iranian government was scared, "Oh, they could be here too if we're not careful." They didn't decide nuclear weapons are a bad idea forever, "We'll never want to have that." But they thought, if I'm understanding correctly was, "Okay, let's put a hold on this for now. It's kind of too dangerous to play with. We can get back to it later." Is that a fair way to look at it?

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah, I think so. Because what you had was a deeply committed regime to building five nuclear weapons, building a nuclear test site so they could conduct an underground test and essentially, they wanted to demonstrate their capability. They could have just built their weapons and kept them. The weapons, four of them were going to be put on Shahab-3 missiles. The weapons design program was very sophisticated. They headed a successful design at the end of the program. They still needed to do some of the work.

They didn't have a source of weapon grade uranium, and we should come back to that. So, they weren't within months of being able to build nuclear weapons in 2003. With fears of military invasion, in this sense, they could look at what the Bush administration did with Iraq on a WMD program that didn't exist. Iran had a nuclear weapons program and could only envision what could happen to it.

It made this decision before the whole insurgency developed in Iraq, where the U.S. would be unable to really do something next door. But at the time, in summer of '03, it had a very big impact to convince the Iranian government not to build those weapons. But we don't think they gave it up. In the archive documentation, and Andrea worked on this with me, was discussions of how to continue the program to better camouflage it, and to work on the bottlenecks that existed.

Interestingly, one of the things that they continued on was the facility to make weapon grade uranium. One of the surprises to me in the archive was a picture showing what we now call the Fordow enrichment site support area and we were able to analyze that picture and relate it to current satellite imagery and satellite imagery from 2003 and 2004, and show that indeed, that was the site. So, what we now know as Fordow was the site and it was part of this crash nuclear weapons program to make weapon grade uranium. The construction continued after the so-called "end" of this program.

**MAY:** I'm going to play devil's advocate, or maybe in this context, Satan's advocate. Andrea, if somebody says, "Look, the U.S. has nuclear weapons, Israel has nuclear weapons," we kind of know that even though they don't quite acknowledge that. "Why shouldn't the Islamic Republic of Iran have nuclear weapons?" What would you be your response?

**STRICKER:** Well, we think about Iran's activities in the region now with its support for proxies its support for terrorism, its involvement in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and its launching of rockets at Israel via Hamas. I think Iran with nuclear weapons would only embolden it. It would give it cover to do more. So that's why administration after administration in the United States and other governments take it so seriously to stop Iran's nuclear program.

**MAY:** Also, under its own treaty obligations that it's undertaken freely, the NPT, and explain what that is, Iran has promised not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, have they not?

**STRICKER:** That's right. Under the NPT, anybody that signs up commits never to develop nuclear weapons. Now what's interesting is that the 2015 nuclear accord or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA, it sort of



had Iran double promise not to make nuclear weapons, even though we know that it had been working on them. So, under the NPT, states sign up to what's called a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements, or a CSA, and that requires them to declare anywhere that they use nuclear material, where they produced it and they have to list all the sites for the International Atomic Energy Agency, the IAEA. So that the IAEA can go inspect and confirm that countries aren't diverting nuclear material to non-peaceful uses.

These are legal obligations under the NPT. So these are separate from what the JCPOA entails, which is more of a political commitment. As such, they endure regardless of the accord's status.

**MAY:** With that as background, David, I think I want you to tell the story of how this archive was compiled and why it was compiled by the Iranians and how the Israelis got hold with it, and finally, how you obtained access to study it. I think people may know that if they've read about this, but they may not. So let's go over there, and it's a great story besides.

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah. I think that the origin of the archive isn't completely clear. What appears to have happened is that during the negotiation of the JCPOA, the Iranians decided that they were to need to consolidate their information, their documentation. So, they apparently collected it, and this is based on largely what the Israelis told me. That they collected it and put it into essentially were shipping containers on wheels that could be moved relatively quickly and they put all this information into these containers and then put it at a location.

The Israelis learned about that location. They also learned that the Iranians were moving it to another site and so they were able to track it to the new site. They decided that rather than just watch it, that it would be best to try to seize it and take as much as they possibly could. They had some inside information, although I think it was sporadic, they understood the significance of the documents. They had some knowledge of the layout. The documents were in very heavy-duty safes. There were about 20 or 30 of them in these shipping containers, very hard to break into.

They decided to launch the operation in January of 2018. I'm sure hundreds of people were involved over these couple years of observing and planning this operation and they went in. The site was very distinctive of a secret Iranian site. What you'd have is, there won't be a lot of security because that's the signature of a secret site. Very few people in Iran knew about this site and that's another signature of an important secret site.

So, because there's no physical security at night because it would have been a tip off to intelligence agencies that this was indeed a site, that the Israelis were able to take control of the security system, leave it on, but able to get through it and spend the evening and night cracking the safes. I saw the equipment used, it looks like simple equipment, but it's extremely hard to break into these safes. They managed to break into six overnight and carry away a whole set of documents of 50,000 pages worth in various colored binders.

They happened to find a collection of CDs, and they didn't expect that. They actually had good communications, they would call back to Tel Aviv and were told to take those too. It's fortunate they did, because a lot of the –

**MAY:** They called back from Tel Aviv while they were doing it? In the midst of breaking into this warehouse and stealing things, they would make a phone call and say, "Hey, should I grab these CDs as well guys?"

**ALBRIGHT:** That's right. And they've emphasized, they had good communication. So they did take it and it turned out to be an extremely fortunate decision. They left on schedule. They had given a time that they could spend in there.



They wanted to get out at least two hours before the daytime guards would show up. They left and they expected some of their people would be caught. So they divided up the set of documents and then they left, in some way that they were not willing to talk about. All the –

**MAY:** Cars and truck, Uber, whatever.

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah. That's right. They called an Iranian Uber, but all the documents got back to Israel, and no one was caught. Iran, obviously was very disturbed when they found this site broken into. It's not clear they knew who did it until Prime Minister Netanyahu gave his press conference in late April 2018.

**MAY:** As a, or the leading researchers in this area, you obviously wanted access to these files and computer disks and all that, but it wasn't so easy, right? The Israelis were not so keen necessarily to share right away and of course everything had to be translated. It's a big enterprise. This is not like getting your book, taking it to the beach and sitting there and reading through it and now you know what the truth is, right? You had to figure out what was in there that was new and exciting and different than–

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah, and it was challenging. The Israelis would brief me. On the day that Netanyahu gave his talk, in April of 2018, I was part of a small group in Washington that got a telephone briefing, but they resisted our requests for documents, and we can do our own translation. I mean, of course we appreciate theirs, but they translate from Farsi to Hebrew. I've learned some Hebrew over the years, but certainly can't read technical documents in Hebrew, let alone barely read a restaurant menu. So, the media was given documents and the first ones we got were actually in a set of documents, given to American –Well, German and a American journalist in the spring and summer of 2018 and the journalists had a very hard time making any sense out of it. That's partly why we would get them is to help them. But also, they realized the ones who shared that they had barely scraped the surface of what was in the documents they received.

We used that to start producing reports. Initially, we used the translations provided by the Israelis into English, although we were starting to check them. Then after we published, they were willing to host me in Tel Aviv and I ended up making four trips. Then we set up, during COVID time, ways of communicating electronically and through couriers to gain additional information. We also decided to set up our own ability to translate and that was key because many of the documents, most of them in fact, that we received in the end were in Farsi and a visit to Israel could involve several hours of discussing this information with the Israelis, the analysts going through the archive and be given a disk with information on it. There would be a short presentation by the Israelis of what's on the disk.

But essentially, the disk they generated was based on questions that I'd asked them. So we weren't given, beyond what we got from the journalist, most of what we got was as a result of our own research interests to try to understand the archives and often they would say, no. They would say, "This is proliferation sensitive." I would see things, people, we were interested in the names of people because there's hundreds and hundreds of names of people who were part of a nuclear weapons program and they would only give me a sample of those. They wouldn't give me the whole list.

They gave it to the International Atomic Energy Agency, for example, or some other governments, but they viewed some information as too sensitive. Nuclear weapons design information, they categorically refused to share much of that.

**MAY:** Andrea, let me bring you in from a minute. As you were following this, I'm sure you saw in the media, there were a lot of people, journalists, academics, and others saying, "Oh, there's nothing new here. This is old news. Move



along, folks, nothing here to see." That was, in some cases, I don't know, wrong or maybe intentionally deceptive. What was your interpretation?

**STRICKER:** Yeah. I think we viewed that as sort of a wild claim. This is the biggest gold mine of intelligence information about a country's nuclear weapons program that you could possibly ask for. So this is basically a trove of documentation that fills in what the IEA knew about just a little bit, what governments knew somewhat, and it sort of fills out the contours of everything that was missing. Of course, we're not able to see everything and the Israelis weren't able to capture everything, but yeah, to say that there was nothing new. I think their assessment was that we assume the worst in this situation, we assume they had all this. So that's what some of them were saying, but certainly, some were trying to dismiss it for political reasons.

**ALBRIGHT:** One quick thing, when we went through, did the assessment and we were interested in the sites we obviously didn't know, and I would ask the Israelis, did you know about this site? In our count, we looked at let's say, created a list of 20 some important nuclear weapons production sites. Because in the end, this was to build five weapons, but to be able to build a lot more. So, they had this production complex. Half of the sites were not known to the Israelis, and I would push them, "Does the U.S. know?" The answer I got was, in a sense, not always the most direct answer, but the implication was Western intelligence did not know about half the sites that were represented in this archive.

**MAY:** So now you know a greater number, maybe not all, but maybe, of sites where nuclear weapons development has taken place. How many sites are there and how many have IAEA inspectors actually visited?

**ALBRIGHT:** Well, we didn't count them all. There's tens of sites involved in this. We looked for the major ones and came up with a list of around 20 to 23. Only three sites, three or four sites have been visited by the IAEA and one was a cursory visit of Parchin, right before the implementation of the JCPOA where the Iranians actually took the samples. They wouldn't let the IAEA do it. It was a heavily sanitized site. But it's only a small fraction that have been visited and typically, if the IAEA was allowed to do its job, it may not visit all of them, but it would visit most of them. It would try to meet with the people who had worked there. They may have moved on. They may, obviously, they're not at that old site, but they have other jobs. The IAEA would interview those people and Iran has essentially refused.

**MAY:** This is maybe a hard question, but if I asked you the top line of what the archives revealed, there's dozens of things obviously, but maybe just a few of the ones that are really the headlines of what you learned. One, I think was that Iran's rulers have been violating their obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, have been violating their obligations, have always had a nuclear weapons program, an elicited one and a secret one, and that's always been the case. That's one line, I guess. Although, I think you probably knew that before it started, what else did you say, "Wow, this was news to me?"

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah. One of which, and it surprised the Israelis too, that we talked to, was that the nuclear weapons program, the program to build, design and develop the weapon itself is quite sophisticated. They're not copying a bomb design. They've really mastered the thinking through of, the theoretical work, and the practical work of building nuclear weapons. As I mentioned before, they had a few tasks to finish, but it's mostly the tasks that you need to finish before you actually manufacture them on a regular basis. So, they had this bomb program and what that means is that if they do decide to build weapons now, they're a lot closer to it. So, one of the surprises to me was Iran got much further on building nuclear weapons than I thought, and their weapons were more advanced.





The other thing is, one is, we're trying to think through what is a nuclear weapons program? I think one of the mistakes made in the United States is that, if you're not building them, then you don't have a program. We would say that based on the archive and the information we collected of the period from the crash program ending in '03 up to today, which includes a lot of information collected by the International Atomic Energy Agency including the media, they have a program to be prepared to build nuclear weapons and to do it in short order. We use the phrase, "they can build nuclear weapons on demand."

**MAY:** The JCPOA – I think this is confusing to people too. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which I think we can say is not a plan of action, is not comprehensive. The Iran deal that President Obama concluded without congressional approval and most others or Congress didn't think it was a good thing. What you keep hearing, or kept hearing from the Obama administration, you hear from the Biden administration now, is that this deal does or will cut off all paths to a nuclear weapon.

Andrea, I'll start with you on this, but that's just not true, doesn't mean at best and maybe not for sure, it slows progress along those paths. The restrictions in the deal sunset – and I think what sunset means is they disappear at that point. Iran's rulers can obtain nuclear weapons, or as David says, "the capability to produce them on demand", meanwhile, they can be working on ICBM's, which are intercontinental ballistic missiles, which suggest missiles that can go from one continent to another, including to ours to target victims anywhere in the world. Is there any validity I'm not seeing to this claim that, that's it, get the JCPOA in place, can rejoin it. Yeah, we have to worry about other elicited destabilizing activities, but nuclear weapons, we don't have to worry about that anymore. It's done. We know that's not true, don't we? Not least from the archives, but other evidence as well. Andrea start. David, chime in.

**STRICKER:** So, I think people hoped that JCPOA would be a political commitment mostly that Iran would abandon nuclear weapons ambitions but sanctions relief and being intertwined in the international community and international economy, they might abide by international rules. But you're right, the JCPOA really just kicks the can down the road. So, the sunsets, the end of limitations, those begin, and they've started already. We've already lost something called the arms embargo that was put in place by the UN. Now Iran can import and export military related goods. So this is something that was separate. It was put in under the UN resolution that implements the JCPOA, called 2231.

Next step, we're going to be losing the missile embargo under 2231. So, Iran will then be able to import and export missiles. It does that anyway, but it's going to be able to make big deals with Russia and China to upgrade its missile program. So then the nuclear sunsets, those kick in starting in about 2024. So Iran will be able to start deploying and testing advanced centrifuges, which produce enriched uranium. It's going to be able to test its more advanced models that it's been working on all these years. and then by 2031, it will have no more restrictions on its ability to deploy centrifuges. It could even stockpile weapon-grade uranium, if it wants.

**ALBRIGHT:** I think one way to think about it too, is that, and we talk about this in the book. There's three pillars of making a nuclear weapon. You have to have a nuclear explosive material, which for Iran, the first stage is weapon-grade uranium. They had a longer-term vision on plutonium, but the focus was on weapon-grade uranium. The next pillar is making the weapon itself, the nuclear weaponization pillar. The third is the delivery system, which for Iran is a ballistic missile. The JCPOA, as Andrea just described, kicked the can down the road on the fissile material. Fordow, when Iran was caught, became a so-called civilian site. Within weeks, it can be turned back into a site to make weapon-grade uranium and so the JCPOA contains in itself, the destruction of its own purpose in the sense that if the JCPOA sunsets happen, Iran can emerge fully capable of making weapon-grade uranium on a large scale legitimized by the JCPOA.



The JCPOA didn't affect the weaponization. They didn't allow the IAEA. It didn't mandate or force or create a mechanism for the IAEA to really get to the bottom, does Iran have a nuclear weapons program or not, and then dismantle it like it did in countries like South Africa and Taiwan. It witnessed in post-facto the destruction of those programs. So it knows what one looks like, it knows how to take them apart, and it knows how to verify their destruction. The JCPOA did essentially nothing on that pillar and certainly didn't do anything on the missile pillar, and Iran has been free to develop its ballistic missiles

**MAY:** In terms of verification, you point out, first of all, there were a lot of sites that the IAEA hasn't known about and hasn't been able to visit. But even under the JCPOA, there were disclosed sites that could be visited, but no military facilities, and I think we know, I think you know, I think their archives show that it's at military facilities that most of the illicit and secret nuclear work took place in the past, which might lead one to believe in the present or the future that's also where the work will be taking place –

**ALBRIGHT:** No, that's right and a lot's known about Iran. The post-crash program organization's headed by the same leader of this crash program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Most of the people who worked in this crash program went on to work in those organizations, and the names are known as FEDAT and SADAT. The most recent manifestation is SPND is the acronym in English of the Farsi words. and so, it's known. Many times, it's known where some of their work is done, and the IAEA's never visited any of those places. Iran has always said no. They never allowed the IAEA to interview Mohsen Fakhrizadeh up until his death last December, or any other members. So, it's really been a failure of the negotiators to come up with a mechanism that allows the IAEA to do its job.

**MAY:** Well, you mentioned the SPND. Maybe just say quickly, so we understand what that stands – Not what it stands for, because it's – but what it means, what goes on under that rubric.

**ALBRIGHT:** Yeah. Well, the way it's been characterized by foreign governments is that it's a place where the nuclear weaponization skills continue and so if there was work that needed to be done on particular nuclear weapons components, you would find that work done via these post-crash program organizations. The SPND under Fakhrizadeh grew to cover many military research areas, from armed drones, he worked on ballistic missiles, all kinds of advanced conventional weaponry, but in it was also this kernel or this residual nuclear weaponization work. In any one year, it's anyone's guess whether something's active or not, but overall, it was the place where this capability was maintained and protected against incursion by the IAEA, but they couldn't protect it against incursions by Israel.

**MAY:** Andrea, David mentioned that what they seem to be looking for is the ability to produce nuclear weapons on demand at the capability. I'm not sure you have an answer for this if either of you do, but why would they want to have an on-demand ability and not simply warehouse bunches of them? It's just because if you warehouse bunches of nuclear weapons, they're more vulnerable to attack, or you can use your ability to produce them on short order, to blackmail and threaten those you want to – or coerce others, Europeans, Americans, others into doing things your way? Is there a rationale, you understand, to that?

**STRICKER:** Yeah, I think once they cross the line and go out of their NPT obligations, they face the risk of military action and response. They also are allowed to sort of intimidate their neighbors, like you said, without fully crossing that line, and they really have to run the risk that they'll be caught. So, their program is obviously very penetrated. They've had scientists been assassinated over the years. They've had the archive removed. They've had sabotage recently, potentially through Israeli operations. So, I think that's a good reason that they haven't. They just have to worry about the repercussions.



**ALBRIGHT:** And if I could—

**MAY:** David, two things.

**ALBRIGHT:** If I could answer—

**MAY:** Yeah, go ahead.

**ALBRIGHT:** One is that the efforts to stop Iran have had successes. It was a success that they didn't build these weapons under the crash program. We didn't know what happened at the time, but it did, and so we're in a much better position that they didn't build them then. They struggle to get —

**MAY:** This is after—

**ALBRIGHT:** 2003.

**MAY:** 2003, okay.

**ALBRIGHT:** So, they were short, or they were lacking the ability to make weapon-grade uranium and they've struggled to keep their plan secret. They tried, with Fordow and based on my own interviews with the inspectors who went into the plant initially after it was discovered by Western intelligence and revealed that the plant was designed to make weapon-grade uranium, but once the Iranians were caught, they then repurposed it and redesigned it to make low-enriched uranium, and I mentioned it could be reconverted back to weapon-grade uranium. But again, they're caught, so I think their strategy has evolved that the best they can do is this program to be ready to prepare. What they're striving for is to shorten the time between the decision to build and building. That's part of the reason why the sunsets of the JCPOA are so dangerous because if they expire, then Iran can generate the weapon-grade uranium in just a few short weeks. It'll have thought about and worked on building the nuclear weapons for additional many years. Its ballistic missiles will be more capable, and so it'll be able to deploy an arsenal very rapidly, long before a military strike could be ordered. So, I think that's the game plan you have to worry about and that the world has been successful in inhibiting their ability to cross that threshold. I think what Andrea said is also true, that they have to think through the consequences of doing it.

**MAY:** To get where they want to go to, do they need to test a nuclear weapon, or can they rely on computer simulations?

**ALBRIGHT:** They can rely on computer simulations. It's kind of interesting to follow through it because I've seen it in other countries. They created a theoretical group that was studying the wherewithal of how nuclear explosives work. In that, you think about how explosives will work, you had come up with experiments. They had four sites dedicated to carrying out experiments related to the nuclear weapons work that were tied to the theoretical work. So, they were developing a weapon, and they did, that does not require full-scale nuclear testing. They wanted that test site, and one is if you can test, you can improve your skills. You can also demonstrate your capabilities. So certainly, probably, the first order, the test site would have served a political purpose, rather than a technical one. But if they could test, they would develop more sophisticated weapons.





June 15, 2021

*Featuring David Albright and Andrea Stricker*

*Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May*

**MAY:** So, Andrea, I want to talk for a second about the proliferation implications of this, because if the Iranians get where they want to go on this, what is the likely response of, say, the Saudis or the Emirates or the Turks, or maybe the Egyptians? – We'll put aside the Israelis and come back to that. By the way, there are allies of the U.S. around the world who are under significant restrictions that, under the JCPOA and its sunset provisions, Iran will no longer be – In other words, we're kind of saying our allies have to be very strict in terms of not developing nuclear weapons, but our enemies, those saying death to America, we can go easy on them and let them have a little more latitude. I don't think that's going to play very well with, say, the Saudis, is it?

**STRICKER:** No, it's not. I think we already see them moving towards developing a uranium fuel cycle, if you believe U.S. media reports. It sounds like U.S. intelligence is concerned about it and it's talking to journalists potentially that they see two sites, at least, hidden in the desert in Saudi Arabia that they may be starting to hedge their bets because they expect Iran will emerge in just a few short years with a massive enrichment program. I think your list is exactly right. The Saudis, the Turks, maybe the Egyptians. We have the UAE, United Arab Emirates, under the gold standard, so they have committed in a U.S. nuclear energy cooperation agreement, called a 123 agreement, not to develop enrichment and reprocessing. What's to stop them from renegeing on that commitment one day if they feel like they need to match Iran's capabilities? I don't think they're going to stand by.

**MAY:** Then of course, the big question is the Israelis, because the Israelis feel that their very existence is threatened by a nuclear Islamic Republic of Iran, and they're not surmising. They've been threatened. Their existence has been threatened, has been said. Israel is a one nuclear bomb country. We can destroy it and wipe it out with a single missile that manages to land, which may be more possible than the 4,000 or so that Hamas, with Iran's support managed to launch. Israel's got a difficult set of decisions to make over the next few years, and their decisions are complicated by the JCPOA and the sunset revisions, which mean deadlines in a very literal sense of the word, right, David?

**ALBRIGHT:** No, that's right. Often people in the past posited either a deal or war, and Israel has been searching and developing a third way. Whether one agrees with killing scientists or not, I personally don't like that strategy, but it's aimed at delaying their program. We can either take – and it's surgical when you look at the explosions or the assassinations, the people killed, in fact figure very prominently in this crash program literature, and they also appear in post-crash program investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency, destroying this centrifuge assembly facility in Natanz. Iran could have used that today to make thousands of advanced centrifuges a year. Now, they can't. They're limited in the number they can produce.

The attempt to knock out the Natanz underground enrichment plant worked so-so in terms of if you're judging it by ending the operation. It appeared to have destroyed about half the centrifuges based on the recent IAEA report, but Iran deployed more advanced centrifuges, and so the effect on what we call breakout was probably not that great. Again, not every operation succeeds 100%, but the point is that they're going to continue if there is a JCPOA, because I think in the book, we conclude it's an unstable arrangement. They're probably going to continue with these activities. One of the problems they're going to face, according to their own people, is that Iran's programs develop the JCPOA. Taking out or weakening that program requires more military effort. So, at some point, this third way could just start to look like a war.

**MAY:** Mm-hmm. Andrea, we've got elections coming up in Iran, and I'm careful when I say that, because Iran is a dictatorship. It's got a Supreme Leader. He's a Supreme Leader, the dictator for life. Not anybody who wants to run can simply run. He and his advisors decide who's allowed to run. There can be hundreds and even thousands of people who want to run. They can't. So, there's an element of – there are elections, but I don't want people to think it's a democracy. But I guess the question I'm sort of driving at is the election's coming up. Do they play a role, as you understand it? Do



you think that it matters who becomes the next president under the Supreme Leader in Iran? Do you think the Iranians want to delay agreement on allowing the Americans to rejoin the JCPOA, which is, I think, how they view it, until after the election or get it done beforehand? Do you have any sense of that? These are hard questions, I know, but any sense of that based on your reading of this situation?

**STRICKER:** My sense is that the Supreme Leader does want to see how the harder liner takes to this agreement. I think he does want their blessing on it. I do think because of the way that they're slow rolling the negotiations currently, that they are waiting until after the election to see what happens. But ultimately, they do need sanctions relief. Their economy's in a very bad place. We've gutted into their foreign reserves through the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign. Though the Biden administration is not enforcing it as strictly, we still do have many, many sanctions on the country, and they can't export much oil right now. I think they will be forced to make a deal, no matter what.

**MAY:** The Biden administration says they want a deal that's the new and improved JCPOA. They want it to be longer, stronger, and broader. It puzzles me how that happens once you give sanctions relief and once you begin the flow of money over there. As I read the history, and when sanctions were relieved in 2013 in exchange for the interim agreement, after that, the U.S. made a lot of concessions. I'm not sure the Iranians made any concessions whatsoever from 2013 to 2015 when the JCPOA was concluded. It doesn't seem like they've learned from that experience. Once sanctions are lifted, assuming they can be and assuming they are, once the money flows, there's no reason for Iran's rulers to give a longer, stronger or broader agreement, meaning that they don't support Hezbollah and Hamas and the Houthi rebels and all the other things and do they do what they're doing in Syria. Am I wrong about that?

**ALBRIGHT:** Well, the Iranians had two red lines described to me by the negotiators of the JCPOA. That one, they were not going to allow access to military sites and two, they were not going to allow the destruction of centrifuges or nuclear equipment. They stuck to that, and they won on that. The U.S. wanted to focus on reducing the stockpiles of uranium and centrifuges and the U.S. got that. But in terms of build back, what we've seen in the last year is because of the victories of the Iranians, they've been able to build back very rapidly because they, again, did destroy centrifuges and we don't really know what's going on in parts of their military complex.

So, I think if the Iranians, I think did a very good job of preserving their capabilities in the JCPOA. The Iranians have been shown to make concessions under great pressure. The archive shows that. In fact, they didn't build nuclear weapons in '03. It was because of pressure, not because of somehow the sudden conversion of the Supreme leader to believe you need a nuclear free world and you had negotiations under the JCPOA initially because of intense sanctions. You have those sanctions now and Iran makes concessions under pressure.

If that pressure disappears, then I would share your view. Why would Iran do later what it says it won't do now? So, you don't know if the pressure would work, but turning up the pressure, delaying the relief seems to make more sense to me than giving in to just re-establishing the JCPOA without I would use the word, fixing it or replacing it, and then hoping that Iran will make concessions later. I just don't see the mechanism.

If the Biden people would explain it, I'm certainly open to listening. My understanding of Secretary of State Blinken's appearance in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the other day, he wasn't that convincing, and he didn't seem to have any description of what stronger would mean even if they get to the point of getting the Iranians to discuss something beyond the JCPOA. I mean, longer is obvious. Although Iran has in fact said it won't do that, but it's stronger.



One of the things that I would argue is that if the Biden administration is sincere, wire into the JCPOA negotiations, that the IAEA's concerns have to be addressed, not just in a procedural way, in the sense of having meetings that go nowhere. But actually, the condition would be that the IAEA has to have assurances that it's a peaceful program before you remove the sanctions. That would make the deal much stronger.

**MAY:** Maybe as we begin to wrap up, in the news, right now, there are various difficulties that the IAEA is having, Andrea. In terms of access, in terms of verification, can you capsulize or summarize what this controversy is about? Also, why the Europeans who have remained in the JCPOA as has the Islamic Republic of Iran, they did not withdraw when the U.S. did. They've not been pushing terribly hard in terms of either getting the IAEA where they need to go to verify what they need to verify or to penalize Iran's rulers for the various violations of the agreement that have taken place over the past couple of years.

**STRICKER:** Well, that's right. The big monitoring issue started in February. Iran decided that it was no longer going to implement what's called the IAEA's Additional Protocol or EAP. That entails the IAEA being able to go conduct complimentary short-term visits at sort of like ancillary nuclear facilities, where they build centrifuges and things like that.

The JCPOA also put in extra monitoring that it wasn't available around safeguards agreements or the AP to sort of take measurements of Iran's enrichment levels, real-time recordings. The IAEA was put in a bad position of having to negotiate, sort of a bridge monitoring agreement where they would keep recording data, taking these measurements, but Iran would keep the data until it got sanctions relief. That agreement was reached for three months from February until May. They just extended it. It was a tough discussion and negotiation reportedly by the IAEA's Director General Rafael Grossi. He didn't seem very happy about this because in effects he's being extorted. He's being told that, unless something happens, his information that he uses to maintain continuity of knowledge, it's going to be erased.

Between that, between all of Iran's advances over the last two years, really, it started drawing down its nuclear commitments in mid-2019. It augmented those drawdowns when the Biden administration was coming into office. It's now producing for the first time in history, 60% enriched uranium. It's deploying hundreds of advanced centrifuges. You're right, Europe has not been pushing back against this. The Biden administration says that the way forward is to get sanctions relief back in play in effect to pay them, to stop doing these things. Instead of addressing the root of the problem.

**MAY:** David as we wrap up here, are there any other points you want to emphasize that you've made or points that you haven't made because I didn't ask good enough questions?

**ALBRIGHT:** Well, one point I'd like to make is just to supplement what Andrea said, the IAEA has – or actually because of the archive was able to, in a sense, reinvigorate its investigation of Iran's potential nuclear weapons activities, certainly in the past, possibly today. They were able to use the archive to focus on certain sites that they guessed would have nuclear material or had equipment that had contaminated with nuclear material. They pursued that and they were able to show that three sites fall in that category.

Iran has just categorically refused to cooperate with the agency and the agency has sounded the alarm. I mean, they can't do much more. They said, "Look, we can't tell you that Iran's program is peaceful anymore and we're getting more worried that it's not." The world is not responding, but you always have to have evidence and the IAEA has just tabled very concrete evidence. I would say the EU and the U.S. are trying to say, "okay, well, this is a parallel effort. We'll settle



this over time. We'll condemn it will, but we won't pass a resolution in the Security Council to impose sanctions. We'll try to get the JCPOA. "

What point I would want to emphasize is that the JCPOA negotiations, if they are going to be credible, should be wiring in that before any U.S. sanctions are removed, that the IAEA's concerns are addressed, and that Iran has to reveal its past nuclear weapons activities. It has to show the IAEA that it's not conducting nuclear weapons activities today. It's a fairly major step, but it is the IAEA's basically put that on the table and is the world going to walk away and ignore this very concrete evidence or is it going to deal with it?

**MAY:** It really strikes me, it should be up to the French, the British, the German. They should be pushing for this because these negotiations, as I understand are indirectly, the Iranians will not deign to sit down at the same table, but the Americans, because they claim that the sanctions are economic terrorism. It's not even that our negotiators, the U.S. negotiators can say this over the table. But it seems they're unlikely to do it, because they're not particularly courageous when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran, or I would say other enemies and self-declared enemies of the West. I'll leave it there unless you want to comment on that.

**ALBRIGHT:** The only comment I could make is that the Europeans are so scared that war could happen, that they concede to Iran and the Trump administration essentially didn't have enough time to see if maximum pressure would work. So, you now have these forces that are more scared of war and really believe this idea that it's war or the deal. I think that's a very major mistake because there are other ways forward.

**MAY:** It certainly gives leverage to Iran's rulers over everybody else in the world if they're not afraid of that possibility and we are. Well, I'm going to wrap up here. The book of course, is *Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons*. I will personally, if President Biden doesn't have a copy, if his advisors don't, I'll buy them all the copies. They can have Kindle or print, whatever they'll want. Just let me know, I'll send it right over to them. I'll FedEx it. Put it on my bill. David, thank you for your work here.

**ALBRIGHT:** Thank you.

**MAY:** It's hugely important. It's important to the world and we're all grateful and thanks for being on the show with us. Thank you so much, Andrea, for the work you continue to do at FDD. We value that so much and thanks to all of for you listening and being with us today here on *Foreign Policy*.