The UN's Nuclear Watchdog Refuses To Bark And Can't Bite

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Iran Deal: After initially refusing, the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency will brief senators Wednesday. Are its nuclear monitoring practices kept secret because they're inadequate?

Yukiya Amano, the director general of the IAEA, until Friday was refusing to brief senators on exactly how the UN nuclear weapons watchdog would monitor Iran's nuclear activities. Now the longtime Japanese diplomat will testify to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Wednesday.

Democrats skeptical of the deal clearly helped change Amano's mind. They included ranking Foreign Relations member and Maryland liberal Ben Cardin, who urged "direct communications with the IAEA."

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., the committee's ex-chairman targeted by the Obama administration with an ethics probe whose timing is very suspicious, spoke much stronger words.

"We are putting an enormous part of the national security of the United States" and that of U.S. allies into the hands of the UN agency, Menendez said, adding that "the entire verification regime depends upon the IAEA." It is therefore unacceptable "not to be able to question the IAEA about how they're going to go about it, about their abilities to do so, about the budgetary realities they may need in order to accomplish what we want them to accomplish."

Another Democrat, staunch Israel supporter Rep. Brad Sherman of California, was one of 30 members of President Obama's party in Congress to meet with him regarding the Iran deal.

Appearing on MSNBC on Thursday, Sherman complained that "no one in the U.S. government has a copy of" the agreement between the IAEA and Iran.

"It's not clear whether we've been able to read it. That is the tradition with the IAEA. But the traditions of the IAEA, the nuclear watchdog ... are about how to prevent the Netherlands from having a nuclear weapon, how to make sure Costa Rica doesn't do it. The traditions of the IAEA don't fit dealing with a country like Iran."

Sherman also worried about "whether Iran will simply be able to purchase a bomb from North Korea. This deal will give them $56 billion," Sherman noted. "I don't know what the North Korean price is."

With Obama actively seeking the votes of skeptical Democrats, Sherman is invited to meet with the president again in a few days.

A week ago Thursday, the same committee got the "trust us" treatment from Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz on the IAEA — even as Kerry admitted that the U.S. did not possess the text of the IAEA secret side agreement with Tehran regarding the agency's inspection of Iran's Parchin military site, where nuclear weapons development has likely taken place.

"The IAEA has said they are satisfied that they are able to do this in a way that does not compromise their needs and that adequately gets the answers they need," Kerry told the panel. Moniz, at Kerry's side, pointed out the IAEA's "customary confidentiality."

But as even the liberal Huffington Post noted in a headline about that hearing, "Congress Isn't Buying It."

Moniz might have said, "customary ineffectiveness." And Parchin is a key case in point. Two years ago, the IAEA's second-ranking official, Belgian nuclear engineer Herman Nackaerts, was forced to step down for failing to get inspectors into Parchin.

Nackaerts' official bio boasts that he "speaks English, French, German and Dutch fluently." But he obviously hadn't brushed up on his Farsi.

Menendez is right. We're placing our national security in the incompetent hands of a UN agency.

Worse, we're trusting it blindly. When IAEA chief Amano testifies Wednesday, he isn't likely to have a copy of his secret Iran side deal in his pocket, ready to reveal it to Congress and the American people.