

# PROVIDENCE Journal

## **Doug Bandow: Failure not an option in Iran talks**

**By Doug Bandow**

**April 8, 2015**

Iran has been one of Washington's chief antagonists for nearly four decades. But a tentative deal to keep Tehran from building nuclear weapons has been reached. Alas, some Americans fear peace more than war.

Tehran, though an ugly regime, does not threaten America. The United States is the globe's greatest military power with the most sophisticated nuclear arsenal and finest conventional force.

Tehran's leaders are malign actors, but nevertheless have reason to feel insecure. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama regularly declared military action to be "on the table."

Israel is concerned over a possible Iranian nuclear weapon, but when asked in 2011 whether Iran would drop a nuke on Israel, former Defense Minister Ehud Barak responded "Not on us and not on any other neighbor." Israeli Defense Force's Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz observed: "I think the Iranian leadership is comprised of very rational people." Who recognize Israel's overwhelming retaliatory capacity.

Tehran does not appear to have an active weapons program. In October 2013, David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security, told the Senate: "Although Iran is engaged in nuclear hedging, no evidence has emerged that the regime has decided to build nuclear weapons."

Negotiations began to move seriously after the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president. The interim Joint Plan of Action limited Iran's nuclear program and increased international surveillance, halting "the most worrisome projects that Iran has," said the Arms Control Association's Daryl Kimball.

More obviously needed to be done. But only negotiation could yield the necessary additional restrictions and oversight.

For years hawks erroneously predicted that Iran was about to build nuclear weapons. Instead, negotiations reduced Tehran's "breakout" capacity, the time necessary to enrich enough uranium to make one bomb. Before the Joint Plan of Action, Iran's breakout time was a month or so. The U.S. hoped to push that up to a year.

The basic dispute is whether the West demands complete termination of Iran's nuclear activities or agrees to program limits backed by intrusive oversight.

Iran was never likely to surrender: there is broad domestic support for Iran's nuclear program. In contrast, agreement on a more limited pact would discourage development of a nuclear bomb.

Uranium enrichment may have been the most important area of dispute. Noted the Crisis Group, Tehran has no need for so many centrifuges, other than to reject Western interference in Iran's affairs, just as the allies have "no need to exaggerate the breakout risks of Iran's current inventory of a few thousand obsolete IR-1 centrifuges, which are under the most stringent" International Atomic Energy Agency inspection regime. Compromise was required.

An imperfect deal likely was the best the West could expect. Having endured years of escalating penalties, Tehran isn't likely to accept less. U.S. military action would set the stage for another extended Middle Eastern disaster.

Compromise also was the best that Tehran could expect. Iran needs an agreement to meet its economic and security needs. The alternative is persistent economic crisis, geopolitical isolation, and military threat.

There are other issues between the West and Iran, including the latter's regional role. But resolving the nuclear controversy will improve the chances of addressing other disputes.

Nevertheless, negotiation critics continue to promise a better deal if the administration stands firm. Hard-line Republican senators believe Iran should surrender.

Alas, Tehran did not respond to prior pressure by crawling to Washington. Instead, Tehran added centrifuges and increased reprocessing capabilities. Killing the deal and demanding capitulation would risk restarting Iranian efforts, ending enhanced inspections, and encouraging Tehran to follow North Korea in leaving the Non-Proliferation Treaty entirely.

Having blown up the negotiations, the U.S. then might find war the only alternative to a nuclear Iran. Yet that would entail bombing a nation which had not threatened America. A military strike likely would only delay rather than stop the program. The prospects for democracy in Iran would die, while the impact in the Middle East could be catastrophic.

Thus, negotiations always have been the only realistic option to prevent an Iranian bomb. They also could dramatically reduce tensions in the Middle East.

For the people of America and Iran, failure is not an option.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.*