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U.S. Should Make Nuclear Deal With Iran: Americans Must Insist That Washington Choose Peace

By Doug Bandow

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Iran has been one of Washington's chief antagonists for nearly four decades. But a deal to keep Tehran from building nuclear weapons is in sight. Alas, any accord will face significant opposition. Some Americans—including many Republican members of Congress—fear peace more than war.

Yet Tehran, though an ugly regime, does not threaten America. The U.S. is the globe's greatest military power with the most sophisticated nuclear arsenal and finest conventional force. For this reason alone Tehran is unlikely to attack America. Iran would cease to exist.

Tehran's leaders are malign actors, but nevertheless have reason to feel insecure. In 1953 Washington helped overthrow democratically elected Prime Minister Mohamed Mossedegh. The U.S. gave refuge to the brutal Shah after he was overthrown in 1979 and then backed Saddam Hussein's aggressive war against Iran. In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion a number of American analysts publicly advocated attacking Iran. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama regularly declared military action to be "on the table." Israeli leaders also called for attacking Iran. Said Ariane Tabatabai of the Belfer Center "In the past few years, the threat of an Israeli attack became a major concern for many Iranians."

Thus, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) had it exactly reversed when he claimed, "A nuclear-capable Iran is the gravest threat facing America today."

Washington still has good reason to oppose Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the importance of the Middle East has been inflated. The energy market is global. Regional instability is perpetual. An Islamic nuclear bomb already exists, in ever-dangerous Pakistan. Starting another, bigger Middle Eastern war would be more dangerous for America than living with an Iranian bomb.

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.” In December 2010 former Mossad head Meir Dagan said that Tehran’s Islamic government is “rational” and “considering all the implications of their action.” Israeli Defense Force’s Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz made a similar point: “I think the Iranian leadership is comprised of very rational people.” Who would recognize Israel’s overwhelming retaliatory capacity.

No one knows the extent of Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. But Washington’s ally the Shah started the Iranian program. Tehran’s motive, noted former Mossad head and national security adviser Efraim Halevy, “is not the confrontation with Israel, but the desire to restore to Iran the greatness of which it was long deprived.”

Iran does not now appear to have an active weapons program. In November 2007 the National Intelligence Estimate concluded: “We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program,” though it was keeping its options open. The IAEA stated that Iran’s program “was stopped rather abruptly” that year.

The IAEA and U.S. later found some activities that could be weapons-related, but, reported James Risen of the New York Times, the “information has not been significant enough for the spy agencies to alter their view that the weapons program has not been restarted.” Risen cited a U.S. intelligence official who said: “Mossad does not disagree with the U.S. on the weapons program.”

In January 2012 James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, told the Senate: “We assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons, in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.” 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.”

In the aftermath of Washington’s 2003 Iraq invasion Tehran offered to negotiate, only to be spurned by the Bush administration. Discussions began to move seriously after the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran’s president.

The interim Joint Plan of Action, reached in November 2013 and extended through March, froze Iran’s number of centrifuges, ended 20 percent enrichment, reduced (with the objective of ultimately eliminating) stockpiles of 20 percent enriched uranium, froze supplies of five percent enriched uranium, stopped work at Arak nuclear reactor, and increased IAEA surveillance. When the negotiations were extended Tehran agreed to convert its remaining 20 percent enriched stockpiles, restricted its nuclear R&D, and added snap inspections of centrifuge production. By all reports Iran has fulfilled its commitments.

Said the Arms Control Association's Daryl Kimball, the agreement has "halted the most worrisome projects that Iran has." Admittedly, these restrictions are not enough, since, for instance, Iran continues to enrich uranium to 3.5 percent. Moreover, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano acknowledged that "we are not in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran." However, only negotiation is likely to yield additional limits and inspections. Amano noted that the agency needed Tehran's cooperation.

For years hawks erroneously predicted that Iran was about to build nuclear weapons. Instead, negotiations have reduced Tehran's "breakout" capacity, the time necessary to enrich enough uranium to make one bomb. Before the JPOA Iran's breakout time was a month or so. Now it is two to three months. The U.S. hopes to push the breakout time up to a year. Tehran will remain a threshold nuclear state, but it already is one—legally under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The basic dispute today is whether the West demands complete termination of Iran's nuclear activities or agrees to limits on centrifuges and provisions for intrusive oversight to provide advance warning of any Iranian breakout attempt.

The choice is a classic example between the unattainable perfect and realistic good. Iran is unlikely to surrender: there is broad domestic support for Iran's nuclear program and even friends of the West do not favor national humiliation. In contrast, a more limited pact could discourage development of a nuclear bomb. Ryan Costello of the National Iranian American Council pointed out: "No nation has ever built a nuclear weapon under the watch of IAEA inspectors, including the six non-nuclear weapon states that enrich uranium on their own soil."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a dramatic appearance on Capitol Hill to oppose the talks, but none of his objections were persuasive. There is no evidence that Iran is bent on conflict. New York Times columnist Roger Cohen noted that "greater economic contact with the world and the gradual emergence of a young generation of Iranians drawn to the West" could moderate Tehran's foreign policy. Cheating is possible but less likely if Tehran gains more than it loses from the agreement. New threats actually would increase Iran's incentive to build nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the prime minister's remarks, argued Rep. Jan Schakowsky, (D-Ill.), were "an effort to stampede the United States into war once again." (Netanyahu advocated America's disastrous invasion of Iraq.)

Uranium enrichment may be the most important area of dispute. While technical arguments fly freely, the issue is fundamentally political. 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 IAEA inspection regime." Iran wants a rapid increase in allowable centrifuges after the initial period while the allies hope to sufficiently

circumscribe Iranian enrichment to convince Tehran to eventually abandon the program. Compromise is required.

Tehran should be permitted to enrich uranium and conduct nuclear research, while accepting barriers between civilian and potential nuclear programs, including steps to hinder reversibility, with meaningful international oversight. The implementation schedule should be based upon technical requirements but adjusted for political considerations. That is, both Washington and Tehran must receive sufficient benefits upfront to justify battling powerful vested interests against peace. Steady progress in future years will be necessary to preserve support for the deal. It might be necessary, suggested the Crisis Group, to “postpone some difficult concessions until both sides have become accustomed to a new relationship.”

The Crisis Group suggested a complicated, multi-phase timetable to fulfill these requirements. Moreover, sanctions should be suspended and eventually lifted over time to reward Iran for progress while retaining incentives for completing the process.

Such an approach likely is the best the West can expect. Preserving industrial-scale nuclear enrichment matters as much for Iran’s national pride as for energy/economics. Iran would be allowed a controlled increase in enrichment capacity after resolving IAEA issues and under tougher monitoring. Having endured years of escalating penalties, Tehran isn’t likely to accept less. Even many Iranians inclined toward the West back the program. Iran’s leaders have no reason to trust Washington, while U.S. officials who blithely imagine an easy military solution would be setting the stage for another extended Middle Eastern disaster.

Compromise also is the best that Tehran can expect. Only reintegration into the international community would meet Iran’s economic and security needs. Rejecting limits on its nuclear activities would ensure persistent economic crisis and geopolitical isolation and risk an Israeli and/or U.S. military strike. Iran cannot hope for more than the old Reagan adage, “trust but verify,” since Tehran has not always been forthcoming.

There are other issues between the West and Iran. The Washington Post complained that the administration “has declined to counter increasingly aggressive efforts by Iran to extend its influence across the Middle East.” Netanyahu claimed much the same: “the world should demand that Iran ... stop its aggression against its neighbors in the Middle East.”

Yet Tehran, in contrast to America, has not bombed, invaded, or occupied Iran’s neighbors. The Islamic regime’s military spending trails that of Israel, Iraq, and Qatar. Saudi Arabia devotes more than five times as much money as Tehran to the military.

The regional environment remains extremely hostile to Tehran. For decades the U.S. has intervened all around Iran. Washington backed Hussein's Iraq in attacking Iran. Israel has bombed and invaded its neighbors when deemed necessary. Saudi Arabia backed the Taliban in Afghanistan, funded radical Sunni groups in Syria, and intervened militarily in Bahrain, which has an oppressed Shiite majority. Who the most aggressive power?

Demanding a regional Iranian surrender would risk the nuclear talks. In contrast, resolving the nuclear issue would improve the chances of addressing other disputes. A more prosperous Iran would naturally have more regional influence and important differences would remain. But there are important areas for U.S.-Iran cooperation. The two governments could work together in Afghanistan and anti-piracy operations. Iran is a de facto ally against the Islamic State (and before that against both al-Qaeda and the Taliban). Further improvements in relations with Washington could draw Iran away from some of its more radical attachments. Said Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council: after signing a nuclear agreement the two nations "can behave in a way that they do not use their energy against each other."

Nevertheless, negotiation critics promise a better deal if the administration stands firm. "Call their bluff," insisted Netanyahu. The U.S. Congress is threatening new sanctions, which would undercut negotiations after Tehran has limited its program. According to Bloomberg's John Rogin and Eli Lake, even Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, warned U.S. officials that expanding sanctions would wreck the talks. But radical GOP hawks don't care. Sen. Cotton insisted: "The United States must cease all appeasement, conciliation and concessions towards Iran, starting with the sham nuclear negotiations." His position is simple: Iran should surrender.

Ironically, such a demand would encourage Iran to again expand its nuclear capability. Even many Iranians well-disposed toward America support their nation's nuclear program and do not want to be ruled from abroad. President Rouhani would face well-founded criticism for "appeasement" if he proposed yielding to such demands. Noted NIAC's Trita Parsi: Rouhani "wants and needs a deal, but can't afford one that will end his political career in Iran."

Nor did Iran respond to prior pressure by crawling to Washington. Noted Parsi and Reza Marashi of NIAC: "When Washington imposed on Iran the most comprehensive sanctions regime in history, Tehran did not capitulate. Rather, it responded to pressure with pressure." Tehran added centrifuges and increased reprocessing capabilities. Only the 2013 JPOA halted this process. A U.S. demand for capitulation would risk restarting Iranian efforts, ending enhanced inspections, and encouraging Tehran to follow North Korea in leaving the NPT entirely.

Having blown up the negotiations, the U.S. then would find it difficult to maintain international support for sanctions. China and Russia already have reason to break with America. Europeans looking forward to business with Iran would blame Washington for the renewed crisis. War might be Washington's only alternative to a nuclear Iran.

Yet that would entail bombing a nation which had not threatened America and, indeed, had good reason to arm in response to Washington's threats. Moreover, a military strike likely would only delay rather than stop the program. Tehran then would have reason to move ahead as swiftly as possible, since nothing else would protect Iran from further attack. Hope for democracy in Iran likely would die. The popular reaction in Iraq and elsewhere in the Muslim world could be catastrophic.

Thus, negotiations remain the only realistic option to prevent an Iranian bomb. The West must convince Tehran that it doesn't need a bomb. Pressure only goes so far. Equally important are benefits for abandoning any military designs. Noted James Clapper: "Iran's technical advancement, particularly in uranium enrichment, strengthens our assessment that Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so." In his view Tehran would base its decision on a cost-benefit basis, including such interests as security and prestige. Thus, the benefits of any settlement must exceed the costs.

Nearly four decades of hostility and conflict between the U.S. and Iran have malformed America's relations with the entire Middle East. Washington has found itself constantly at war, permanently allied with authoritarian regimes, and repeatedly suffering the consequences of previous mistakes. A possible Iranian nuclear weapon is as much an unintended consequence as cause of U.S. policy.

However, the ongoing negotiations provide a unique opportunity to simultaneously limit the spread of nuclear weapons and reduce tensions in the Middle East. Success is not guaranteed, but Americans should embrace the possibility of peace. Tehran is an ugly regime. However, that only makes a reasonable and enforceable nuclear agreement more critical. The Obama administration has no more important responsibility today than to successfully conclude the ongoing negotiations with Iran. For the people of America and Iran, failure is not an option.

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