



Obama drove Iran nuke deal that could end years of acrimony

By Lesley Clark

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President Barack Obama scored a decisive win on Thursday [with an agreement](#) he says will prevent Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Obama took a risk on pursuing talks with a regime that for three decades has denounced America as “The Great Satan.” In the process, he’s widened the gap between himself and Republicans in Congress and the leader of one of the United States’ closest allies.

But he’s also made important progress toward resolving the years-long standoff over Iran’s nuclear program, in the estimate of independent analysts.

“What is important here is that Iran is further away from a nuclear weapon,” said Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank. “And it does not appear that Iran will get any closer between now and the end of June. There is room for further negotiation.”

There are still massive and complicated issues to be settled before June 30, when a previous interim deal expires, and a skeptical Congress has yet to weigh in.

But the deal the U.S. and five other nations reached with Iran goes further than analysts had expected. Obama allowed himself a few moments of celebration, choosing the sun-dappled Rose Garden at the White House as the backdrop to his remarks as he hailed what he said was a “historic understanding” with Iran after decades of animosity and mistrust.

“I am convinced that if this framework leads to a final, comprehensive deal, it will make our country, our allies and our world safer,” he said.

Administration officials made it clear to reporters that it was in fact a personal triumph for the president, who has championed nuclear nonproliferation since he was a senator.

While other heads of state were deeply involved in the talks, a White House official told reporters that “no one has put in the time, no one has learned the material, no one has been as analytical and decisive and clear about what the priorities are” as Obama.

No one on the negotiating team “ever felt that we were lacking guidance from the president,” another senior official said with a laugh.

In the past couple of months, according to the officials, who spoke with reporters via conference call on the condition of anonymity, Obama would meet with his negotiating team before it left and upon its return, with a special focus on all the scenarios by which Iran could covertly pursue a weapon.

During this last round, Obama was on the phone regularly with Secretary of State John Kerry, National Security Adviser Susan Rice and other National Security Council staffers for the latest updates. He spoke with Rice around midnight Thursday and reiterated that his priority was “the transparency and inspections portion of the deal,” officials said.

Obama went to sleep in the early hours of Thursday, telling aides that he was confident that the team would take into account his “bottom lines” and that a deal would be worked out by the time he awoke. He received a full update with the “final contours” at his daily briefing around 10 a.m., officials said, and at that point he “was certainly comfortable with the deal that was coming together.”

“So, at that point, essentially, he had signed off on what was to become the framework,” a senior official said.

Once the parties were in agreement in Lausanne, Obama personally started working the phones, starting with his allies in the effort: British Prime Minister David Cameron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande. Next he called King Salman of Saudi Arabia and invited Persian Gulf partners to Camp David to discuss the next steps.

Later Thursday, Obama spoke by phone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who, according to his office, denounced the proposal. According to the White House version, Obama assured Netanyahu that the U.S. would strengthen its consultations with Israel on Iran’s threat.

Congress may be where the deal faces its toughest hurdle. Obama warned Congress not to undermine the deal for the sake of scoring political points. Even before the agreement was announced, [leaders in the House of Representatives and the Senate had vowed to take steps](#) to force Obama to seek congressional approval for any deal.

“When you hear the inevitable critics of the deal sound off, ask them a simple question: Do you really think that this verifiable deal, if fully implemented, backed by the world’s major powers, is a worse option than the risk of another war in the Middle East?” Obama said.

Analysts suggested that given the international sign-off the deal was receiving, critics were in an increasingly uncomfortable position.

“If the agreement as outlined, and as they hope will be completed, is seen widely as positive, then for the Republicans to act early and sabotage or interrupt a promising diplomatic process would leave them solely responsible in the eyes of the entire world,” said George Perkovich, vice president for studies at the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#). “I don’t believe that’s a good position politically for Republicans to be in, nor is it good for the country.”

He noted new legislation that tinkers with the agreement could allow Iran to argue that “Congress has now demonstrated, or given us great doubt to think the Americans will live up to their end of the deal.”

Already potential Republican presidential candidates were panning it as a bad deal.

Former Texas Gov. Rick Perry tweeted, “Americans and our allies are right to be wary of a nuclear deal w/Iran that is riddled with concessions by the Obama Administration.”

Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, another possible 2016 GOP White House contender, called the initial details “very troubling.”

“This attempt to spin diplomatic failure as a success is just the latest example of this administration’s farcical approach to Iran,” Rubio said.

And freshman Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., who [wrote a letter last month to Iran’s supreme leader](#) that was signed by 47 Republican senators bashing the nuclear negotiations, said, “There is no nuclear deal or framework with Iran; there is only a list of dangerous U.S. concessions that will put Iran on the path to nuclear weapons.”

White House officials noted that Iran has hurdles as well: Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif will face challenges from diverse quarters: ordinary Iranians, hardliners, the Revolutionary Guards and Quds Force, and parties “who’ve made money because of the sanctions regime.”

There’s no question, they said, that Zarif will have to work hard to sell this deal to his people.

“His task is not simple or a given,” a U.S. official said. “Nor is ours.”