



Regional Implications of a Nuclear Deal with Iran

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America's readiness to negotiate a deal with the Islamic Republic on its nuclear program is a source of deep concern among our traditional friends in the Middle East. For the Arabs, the fear is that the deal will come at their expense, with the United States increasingly seeing Iran as a partner. For the Israelis, the worry is that we will conclude a deal that leaves the Iranians as a threshold nuclear state—capable of breaking out to nuclear weapons at a time when we might be distracted by another international crisis.

Both sets of fears presume that there will be a deal. While the committee has asked us to discuss the regional implications of such a deal, I should note at the outset that I still believe the prospects of an agreement are probably less than the 50 percent figure President Obama cited late last year. Basic conceptual gaps remain, with the Iranians still believing that their limited offers of transparency should be sufficient to satisfy our concerns about the peaceful character of their nuclear program. Will the Supreme Leader, who has talked about not dismantling their program, accept a serious reduction in the numbers of their centrifuges? We will see, but at this point, Ali Khamenei either is not prepared to roll back Iran's nuclear program or doesn't believe he will have to do so in order to produce a serious roll-back in the sanctions regime. He does not appear to understand that there can be no roll-back in sanctions without a roll-back and deep reduction in the Iranian nuclear program—meaning Iranian centrifuges must be dramatically reduced in number, much of the accumulated enriched uranium must be shipped out of the country, Fordow must be shut down or completely disabled, and the Arak heavy water plant must be converted so it cannot produce plutonium.

The Iranian negotiators at this point have given no indication of being able to accept such a roll-back. And yet, if we are to concede limited enrichment for the Iranians, roll-back of this sort plus transparency both beyond the Additional Protocol and about the possible military dimensions of their program will be required. Even if President Rouhani and Mohammad Javad Zarif, his foreign minister, are ready to accept such a deal—and it is not clear that they are—can they sell this to the Supreme Leader? Maybe, but I suspect that still remains a long shot.

To be sure, if there is to be a deal, the Supreme Leader must see the very high costs to the Islamic Republic of diplomacy failing. He must be convinced that such failure will mean enduring, severe economic pain for Iran as well as the high probability that force will be used to destroy the huge investment the Islamic Republic has made in its nuclear facilities. Ironically, that posture—which may make a deal more likely—would also be useful for assuaging the deep concerns our regional friends have about any possible P5+1 nuclear accord with the Iranians.

Both the Israelis and our key Arab friends believe that we are anxious for a nuclear deal, and they are not taking seriously the administration's declarations that no deal would be better than a bad deal. They see active Iranian efforts to change the balance of power in the region and, fairly or not, little sign that we are prepared to compete with the Iranians as they do so. That has led to a perception among our regional friends that we attach such importance to a deal on the Iranian nuclear program that we turn a blind eye to Iranian behavior in the region.

The administration argument that it is simply separating the nuclear issue from the other Iranian challenges in the area has not altered the impression of many in the region that our concerns about the Iranian nuclear program trump everything else. Here, it is worth highlighting that the Israeli and Arab concerns are different when it comes to Iran.

For the Israelis, their priority is the Iranian nuclear program. That constitutes an existential threat. Iran and its proxies like Hezbollah constitute a threat, but, in Israeli eyes, that is manageable. Iran possessing nuclear weapons is not manageable or containable. For the Saudis, Iran already represents an existential threat even without nuclear weapons. The Saudis, Emiratis, and others see an aggressive Iranian pursuit of regional hegemony. From a Saudi standpoint, the Iranians are encircling them—seeking to gain dominance in, and the ability to threaten them overtly and covertly from, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The Iranian nuclear program would add to the threat—perhaps making the Iranians less risk averse—but it is not the source of the problem they see.

Talk of a possible reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is likely to mean little. They are competitors in every sense of the word. It is not just Arab versus Persian, Sunni versus Shiite, or even traditional balance of power concerns related to regional dominance. It is all of these things, and it goes to the source of legitimacy for each. The Islamic Republic challenges the legitimacy of any monarchy and has pretensions to lead Muslims internationally. The Saudis see a fundamental threat to their role in leading Sunnis and feel that Iran challenges it religiously.

For the Saudis, an Iran with nuclear weapons requires a countervailing response; such weapons would certainly add to the dangers. But in the near term, the Saudis may fear even more an Iran that is no longer being damaged by severe economic sanctions, no longer isolated internationally, increasingly able to develop economically, and with more means for troublemaking. As such, the Saudis in particular may fear that a deal on the nuclear program will not only signal a new American openness to Iran, but, even more, give the Iranians license to be more aggressive in the region, and with the economic wherewithal to do so. Words alone will not reassure the Saudis in the aftermath of a deal. They will look for signs that a nuclear deal is not going to transform our relationship with Iran—and that we will be vigilant in countering Iran's threats in the area.

Unlike the Saudis, the measure for the Israelis is what kind of deal is reached. The Saudis will be suspicious of any nuclear deal; for the Israelis, it depends on the deal. A deal that precludes the Iranians from being able to turn a civil nuclear program into a nuclear weapons capability would be welcomed. Such a deal would remove an existential threat to Israel. The problem for the Israelis is that the deal that would make them most comfortable is probably not attainable in the P5+1 negotiations; Israelis feel that Iran must be denied an ongoing enrichment capability. While that would be for the best from a strictly nonproliferation standpoint, it is probably not attainable—at least that is the consensus of those members of the P5+1 negotiating with the Iranians. The question for the Israelis becomes whether they can be reassured enough about the scope of the roll-back of the Iranian program, the transparency measures designed to prevent cheating on the roll-back, and the credible consequences that would be imposed on the Iranians if they cheated anyway.

What implications does this have for our approach toward our regional friends if there is a deal? Since the Saudi and Israeli concerns are different, our approaches to them should also differ in some respects. That said, anything which suggests that the United States will actively compete with the Iranians would be reassuring to both. All of our friends want to see that we will not permit Iran to become stronger in the region at their expense, that we will be there for our friends if they face threats, and that we don't so fear conflict with Iran that we will acquiesce to any of its behaviors.

In this regard, there are two steps we could take that would be reassuring to Arabs and Israelis alike:

- Demonstrate in Syria that our concern is about both the growth of the jihadist presence in the country and the prospects of Assad cementing his hold on power. The former threatens all of us; the latter would signal a victory for Iran and the demonstration that it succeeds when it uses its power to alter the landscape in the region. We need to show that we will not acquiesce to that outcome. This means not just increasing lethal assistance to the pragmatic Syrian opposition, but doing so with an eye toward changing the balance of power on the ground, including between the opposition and the regime. This means taking control of the collective effort to support the opposition—through training, material assistance, arming, etc.—in order to make sure that everything that is being done to support the acceptable opposition is coordinated and complementary.
- Show that we will not allow the Iranians to ship arms clandestinely around the region. This means interdicting clandestine Iranian arms shipments. The Israelis interdicted the *Klos C* ship carrying Iranian arms to Gaza, but we should have done it. We don't have to announce what we are doing or even take public credit for it; we just need to do it. The Iranians and our friends will see it and understand that we are competing and that the Iranians will pay a price for what they are doing.

As for additional steps geared toward the specific concerns of Arabs and Israelis, we might launch contingency planning with the Saudis and Emiratis on how we would deal with particular Iranian threats. This would show our seriousness and also put us in a position to act when needed; if this meant different kinds of exercises with each, the Iranians would also get the message.

With the Israelis, if there is a nuclear deal, we could discuss the specific steps we would take if the Iranians cheat on a deal and how we would impose consequences—even anticipating that there might be reluctance on the part of others to hesitate in the face of violations of the agreement. We might also compensate the Israelis if there is a deal by providing more bunker-buster bombs and more tankers to make them more capable of militarily acting on their own against the Iranians in the face of cheating. This would reassure the Israelis that even if we felt constrained to act militarily in the face of Iranian violations of an agreement that made a breakout possible, Israel would not be left without options.

CONCLUSIONS

Our traditional friends in the Middle East are very suspicious about Iran's aims in the region. Although the Obama administration has tried to reassure the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis about our commitments and our understanding of Iranian behavior, there are deep-seated doubts about what we are actually prepared to do. While our hesitancy on Syria may reflect understandable concerns about avoiding a quagmire, the Iranians show no such hesitancy and have invested heavily in ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. In a region where an Iranian win is seen as a loss for our friends, the worries about us have increased. It is through that lens that many of our regional friends view a possible nuclear deal with Iran. The Israeli and Saudi fears are

different, but if we want to reassure our friends about such a deal, we need to understand the source of their worries and take steps that address them. That does not mean accepting fears that we think are misplaced, but it does mean taking steps that can make us more secure and also signal to the Iranians they will pay a price for behaviors outside the nuclear area that we find unacceptable. Ironically, that may make a deal itself more likely.