

Iranian Nuclear Talks: Negotiating a Bad Deal?

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Hearing on Iranian Nuclear Talks: Negotiating a Bad Deal?

On the surface, the Islamic Republic of Iran has hardly been a responsible actor in the conduct of its foreign relations. A regime that is deeply embedded in Syria's civil war and has embraced terrorism as an instrument of statecraft would seemingly be at a disadvantage in presenting its case to the international community. Yet, Iran has had some success imposing its narrative on the negotiations Iranian officials and the Western nations are conducting about its nuclear program. The theocratic state's "right" to enrich has already been acknowledged in practice if not in principle. The Islamic Republic continues to denounce the numerous U.N. Security Council Resolutions as politically-contrived documents without authority or legitimacy. Thus far, there is little indication that the so-called 5 plus 1 countries are demanding a suspension of Iran's nuclear activities as demanded by the Security Council. And Iran is reported to insist on sustaining its existing enrichment capacity which has placed it well on the road toward nuclear empowerment. The great power's diplomacy will be judged not by clever formulations they devise to accommodate Iran's "red-lines" but by their ability to veer Tehran away from its maximalist positions.

President Hassan Rouhani has managed to inculcate the notion that he is under pressure from the hard-liners at home and that a failure by the West to invest in his presidency would end Iran's moderate interlude. The implication is that time is of the essence, and the West should not miss an opportunity to deal with pragmatists who seek an arms control breakthrough. In essence, the only manner of fortifying the forces of moderation in Iran is for the West to make nuclear concessions.

But a more careful examination reveals that the Islamic Republic has reached an internal consensus. It is ruled today by a unity government. The factionalism that has historically bedeviled the theocracy has, for now, been set aside. For the first-time in its three-decades of existence, the Islamic Republic is not troubled by divisions and dissensions that have undermined previous governments.

For Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the most important objective is the survival of the regime and preservation of its ideological character. As an astute student of history, Khamenei senses that disunity among the elites can feed popular discontent and imperil the regime. The fraudulent presidential election of 2009 caused not only a legitimacy crisis but also divided the regime's elites. By conceding to Rouhani's election, Khamenei has managed to restore a measure of accountability to the system and has drawn some of his disgruntled cadre back to the fold. Given such domestic calculations, Rouhani's political fortunes are not necessarily contingent on the success of his arms-control policy. Khamenei clearly hopes that his president can ease Iran's economic distress, but the notion that Rouhani will be displaced unless he can quickly obtain concessions from the West is spurious.

Another issue that can paradoxically redound to U.S. advantage is the raised expectations for a deal by November 24th or potentially beyond. To be fair, both Iranian and U.S. officials have unwisely raised expectations and fed a media narrative of a potential historical breakthrough between the two old nemeses. Suddenly, the hard-pressed Iranian public has come to expect imminent financial relief. Should the negotiations not yield an accord in a timely manner, it is Khamenei, not President Obama, who would face a popular backlash. A disenfranchised and dispossessed population is an explosive political problem for Khamenei. The Western powers should not be afraid to suspend negotiations or walk away, should the Iranians prove intransigent. Ironically, stalemated negotiations are likely to pressure Iran into offering more concessions.

More than Just Nuclear Infractions

Although Iran's nuclear ambitions have garnered much attention, the Islamic Republic remains a revisionist state that has done much to imperil core American interests in the Middle East. It has lately been fashionable to suggest that the rise of ISIL offers a pathway for cooperation between the United States and Iran. On the surface, this may seem sensible, as both Washington and Tehran have an interest in defanging a militant Sunni group. But we would be wise to heed the essential axiom of Middle East politics: the enemy of my enemy is still my enemy. The ebbs and flows of the war on terrorism should not be allowed to conceal the fact that the theocratic regime and its attempt to upend the regional order remains the United States most consequential long-term challenge in the Middle East.

The Islamic Republic is not a normal nation-state seeking to realize its legitimate interests but an ideological entity mired in manufactured conspiracies. A persistent theme of Khamenei's speeches is that the United States is a declining power whose domestic sources of strength are fast eroding. In today's disorderly region, Iran sees a unique opportunity to project its influence and undermine the United States and its system of alliances.

In Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the misapprehension was born that the United States needed Iran's assistance to rehabilitate its war-torn charge, and this misbegotten notion has since migrated from crisis to crisis. The tactical assistance that Iran offered in Afghanistan in 2001 was largely motivated by its fears of being the next target of U.S. retribution. Even Rouhani's own memoirs reflect how concerned and fearful the Islamic Republic was once U.S. forces deposed Saddam's regime in three-weeks. Once Tehran was convinced that America was dragged into a quagmire of its own making, it proceeded to lacerate U.S. forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan by providing munitions and sanctuaries to various militias. In the meantime, Tehran sought steadily to subvert America's allies in the Persian Gulf and to undermine the security of Israel. The Islamic

Republic remains the most generous benefactor to both Hamas and Hezbollah who have done much to menace the state of Israel.

Today, in the two central battlefields of the Middle East—Syria and Iraq—Iran’s interests are inimical to those of the United States. Iran’s stake in Syria has been made clear by its provisions of money, oil, arms, advisors and, most important, Hezbollah shock-troops to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The United States’ interests, meanwhile, strongly argue against working with Iran against ISIL lest we lose the very Sunni support that will be necessary to eradicate that group. By taking a firm stand in Syria against both Assad and ISIL, we can send a strong signal to Iran’s leaders that the price of its troublemaking is going to rise.

Similarly in Iraq, any putative alliance with Iran would undo much of what the United States has attempted to accomplish there—the creation of a pluralistic, unitary state that does not represent a threat to itself or its neighbors and which is not a base for terrorism. The only way that President Obama’s objective of not only “degrading” but also “destroying” the Islamic State can be achieved is by taking back, over time, much of the territory seized by its fighters in the Sunni provinces. This will require not only airstrikes in support of the Kurdish troops and Iraqi forces but also significant buy-in from the Sunni tribes who formed the backbone of the uprising against al-Qaeda during the surge. In addition, the sine qua non of the administration’s policy is an inclusive government in Iraq that can draw support from neighboring Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Both of these will be unattainable if there is a perception that the United States is seeking a de facto alliance with Iran.

During the past decade, and over two administrations, the United States has been effective in estranging Iran from its European and even Asian customers. But Washington has not affected Iran’s position in the Middle East to the same degree. Beyond arms sales to Arab states and attempts to assuage Israeli concerns, the United States has not undertaken a systematic effort to isolate Iran in its immediate neighborhood. Instead of pursuing the chimera of cooperation with the likes of Khamenei, Washington should contest all of Iran’s regional assets. From the Shia slums of Baghdad to the battlefields of Syria, Iran should be confronted with a new, inhospitable reality as it searches for partners and collaborators.

The United States and Iran stand at opposite ends of the spectrum in Middle East politics. The Islamic Republic’s ideological compulsions and sheer opportunism make it an unlikely ally for the West. The coincidence of mutual opposition to a radical Sunni terrorist group should not blind us to the enduring threat that the mullahs represent.

Iran’s Negotiating Style

As the November 24th deadline looms, there is a peculiar concern that Congress can derail the negotiations through bluster and legislation. There are calls for rushing the talks and presenting a skeptical Congress with a deal before they assume their majority. On the surface it seems unusual to worry about the longevity of a diplomatic process that thus far lasted over a decade. Still, no matter what Congress does the Islamic Republic will not walk away from the negotiating table. Given how nuclear diplomacy serves Iran’s many interests, Congress is unlikely to disrupt the on-going talks.

Since the exposure of its illicit nuclear program in 2002, Iran’s main intention has been to legitimize its expanding atomic infrastructure. The record reveals that Iran’s cagy diplomats have gone far in achieving that objective. Although numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions have enjoined Iran to suspend all of its nuclear activities, there is little interest by the great powers to enforce the injunctions that they themselves crafted in the first place. This is an impressive accomplishment for a state that not only defies the U.N. Security Council but

also thwarts the International Atomic Energy Agency's attempt to gain access to its scientists and sites. So long as Iran stays at the table it can count on further Western indulgences.

The Islamic Republic has also gained much in non-nuclear sectors from its continued participation in the talks. The clerical regime's dismal human rights record and its harsh repression of its citizens are rarely mentioned by the Western chancelleries. A standard practice of America's Cold War summitry was to press the cause of dissidents in all encounters with Soviet representatives. Given fears that Iran's hyper-sensitive mullahs would abjure nuclear compromises should their domestic abuses be highlighted, the Western diplomats have gone out of their way in assuring their interlocutors that they recognize the clerical regime as a legitimate international actor. The nuclear talks and the prospects of an accord conveniently shield the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's repressive state from censure and criticism.

The Islamic Republic today is an aggressive state on the march in the Middle East. Through its proxies and aid it is propping up the Assad regime in Syria and enabling its genocidal war against its citizens. Iran is the most consequential external actor in Iraq and has been instrumental in pressing its Shia allies to reject substantial inclusion of Sunnis in Iraq's governing structure. In the Gulf, Tehran continues to press for eviction of U.S. presence, appreciating that only America's armada stands in the way of its hegemonic ambitions. Terrorism remains an instrument of Iran's statecraft, particularly against Israel. Yet, there is a reluctance to push back on Iran in the increasingly chaotic Middle East for the fear that such a move would undermine the nuclear talks.

In the coming weeks, the diplomats will try hard to craft a nuclear agreement with Iran. They may succeed or they may extend the talks beyond their own self-imposed deadline. In the meantime, they will warn the Iranians that time is running out and various windows are about to slam shut. They will fret about how Congress can foreclose diplomacy by pressing its claims and maybe even passing sanctions measures. The task at hand will be to keep Iranians at the table and the Congress at bay. All this misses the point that the Islamic Republic participates in the talks because they serve so many of its interests. And one of those interests may yet be an accord that eases its path toward nuclear empowerment.