

# On the Iran Nuclear Agreement and Its Consequences

Prepared statement by

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Mr. Chairman: Thank you for this opportunity to speak about the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (JCPOA) signed on July 14 by representatives of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany, and Iran. I want to make it clear that what you are about to hear are my personal views and should not be interpreted as representing the Council on Foreign Relations, which takes no institutional positions.

The agreement with Iran, like any agreement, is a compromise, filled with elements that are attractive from the vantage point of US national security as well as elements that are anything but. A simple way of summarizing the pact and its consequences is that at its core the accord represents a strategic tradeoff. On one hand, the agreement places significant limits on what Iran is permitted to do in the nuclear realm for the next ten to fifteen years. But these limits, even if respected in full, come at a steep price. The agreement almost certainly facilitates Iran's efforts to promote its national security objectives throughout the region (many of which are inconsistent with our own) over that same period. And second, the agreement does not resolve the problems posed by Iran's actual and potential nuclear capabilities. Many of these problems will become greater as we approach the ten year point (when restrictions on the quantity and quality of centrifuges come to an end) and its fifteen year point (when restrictions pertaining to the quality and quantity of enriched uranium also end).

I was not a participant in the negotiations; nor was I privy to its secrets. My view is that a better agreement could and should have materialized. But this debate is better left to historians. I will as a result address the agreement that exists. I would say at the outset it should be judged on its merits rather than on hopes it might lead (to borrow a term used by George Kennan in another context) to a mellowing of Iran. This is of course possible, but the agreement also could have just the opposite effect. We cannot know whether Iran will be transformed, much less how or how much. So the only things that makes sense to do now is to assess the agreement as a transaction and to predict as carefully as possible what effects it will likely have on Iran's capabilities as opposed to its intentions.

I want to focus on three areas: on the nuclear dimension as detailed in the agreement; on the regional; and on nuclear issues over the longer term.

There is understandable concern as to whether Iran will comply with the letter and spirit of the agreement. Compliance cannot be assumed given Iran's history of misleading the IAEA, the lack of sufficient data provided as to Iran's nuclear past, the time permitted Iran to delay access to inspectors after site-specific concerns are raised, and the difficulty likely to be experienced in reintroducing sanctions. My own prediction is that Iran may be tempted to cut corners and engage in retail but not wholesale non-compliance lest it risk the reintroduction of sanctions and/or military attack. I should add that I come to this prediction in part because I believe that Iran benefits significantly from the accord and will likely see it in its own interest to mostly comply. But this cannot be assumed and may be wrong, meaning the United States, with as many other governments as it can persuade to go along, should both make Iran aware of the penalties for non-compliance and position itself to implement them if need be. I am assuming that the response to sustained non-compliance would be renewed sanctions and that any military action on our part would be reserved to an Iranian attempt at breaking out and fielding one or more nuclear weapons.

The regional dimension is more complex and more certain to be problem. Iran is an imperial power that seeks a major and possibly dominant role in the region. Sanctions relief will give it much greater means to pursue its goals, including helping minority and majority Shi'ite populations in neighboring countries, arming and funding proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas, propping up the government in Damascus, and adding to sectarianism in Iraq by its unconditional support of the government and Shia militias. The agreement could well extend the Syrian civil war, as Iran will have new resources with which to back the Assad government. I hope that Iran will see that Assad's continuation in power only fuels a conflict that provides recruiting opportunities for the Islamic State, which Iranian officials rightly see as a threat to themselves and the region. Unfortunately, such a change in thinking and policy is a long shot at best.

The United States needs to develop a policy for the region that can deal with a more capable, aggressive Iran. To be more precise, though, it is unrealistic to envision a single or comprehensive US policy for a part of the world that is and will continue to be afflicted by multiple challenges. As I have written elsewhere, the Middle East is in the early throes of what appears to be a modern day 30 Years War in which politics and religion will fuel conflict within and across boundaries for decades, resulting in a Middle East that looks very different from the one the world has grown familiar with over the past century.

I will put forward approaches for a few of these challenges. In Iraq, I would suggest the United States expand its intelligence, military, economic, and political ties with both the Kurds and Sunni tribes in the West. Over time, this has the potential to result in gradual progress in the struggle against the Islamic State.

Prospects for progress in Syria are poorer. The effort to build a viable opposition to both the government and various groups including but not limited to the Islamic State promises to be slow, difficult, anything but assured of success. A diplomatic push designed to produce a viable successor government to the Assad regime is worth exploring and, if possible, implementing. European governments likely would be supportive; the first test will be to determine Russian receptivity. If this is forthcoming, then a joint approach to Iran would be called for.

I want to make two points here. First, as important as it would be to see the Assad regime ousted, there must be high confidence in the viability of its successor. Not only would Russia and Iran insist on it, but the United States should as well. Only with a viable successor can there be confidence the situation would not be exploited by the Islamic State and result in the establishment of a caliphate headquartered in Damascus and a massacre of Alawites and Christians. Some sort of a multinational force may well be essential.

Second, such a scenario assumes a diplomatic approach to Iran. This should cause no problems here or elsewhere. Differences with Iran in the nuclear and other realms should not preclude diplomatic explorations and cooperation where it can materialize because interests are aligned. Syria is one such possibility, as is Afghanistan. But such diplomatic overtures should not stop the United States acting, be it to interdict arms shipments from Iran to governments or non-state actors; nor should diplomatic outreach in any way constrain the United States from speaking out in reaction to internal political developments within Iran. New sanctions should also be considered when Iran takes steps outside the nuclear realms but still judged to be detrimental to other US interests.

Close consultations will be required with Saudi Arabia over any number of policies, including Syria. But three subjects in particular should figure in US-Saudi talks. First, the United States needs to work to discourage Saudi Arabia and others developing a nuclear option to hedge against what Iran might do down the road. A Middle East with nuclear materials in the hands of warring, potentially unstable regimes would

be a nightmare. This could involve assurances as to what will not be tolerated (say, enrichment above a specified level) when it comes to Iran as well as calibrated security guarantees to Saudi Arabia and others. Second, the Saudis should be encouraged to reconsider their current ambitious policy in Yemen, which seems destined to be a costly and unsuccessful distraction. The Saudi government would be wiser to concentrate on contending with internal threats to its security. And thirdly, Washington and Riyadh should maintain a close dialogue on energy issues as lower oil prices offer one way of limiting Iran's capacity to pursue programs and policies detrimental to US and Saudi interests.

The agreement with Iran does not alter the reality that Egypt is pursuing a political trajectory unlikely to result in sustained stability or that Jordan will need help in coping with a massive refugee burden. Re-establishing strategic trust with Israel is a must, as is making sure it as well as other friends in the region have what they need to deal with threats to their security. (It matters not whether the threats come from Iran, the Islamic State, or elsewhere.) The United States should also step up its criticism of Turkey for both attacking the Kurds and for allowing its territory to be used as a pipeline for recruits to reach Syria and join the Islamic State.

The third area of concern linked to the nuclear pact with Iran stems from its medium and long-term capabilities in the nuclear realm. It is necessary but not sufficient that Iran not be permitted to assemble one or more nuclear bombs. It is also necessary that it not be allowed to develop the ability to field a large arsenal of weapons with little or no warning. This calls for consultations with European and regional governments to begin sooner rather than later on a follow-on agreement to the current JCPOA. The use of sanctions, covert action, and military force should also be addressed in this context.

I am aware that members of Congress have the responsibility to vote on the Iran agreement. As I have said, it is a flawed agreement. But the issue before the Congress is not whether the agreement is good or bad but whether from this point on the United States is better or worse off with it. It needs to be recognized that passage of a resolution of disapproval (presumably overriding a presidential veto) entails several major drawbacks. First, it would allow Iran to resume nuclear activity in an unconstrained manner, increasing the odds the United States would be faced with a decision – possibly as soon as this year or next – as to whether to tolerate the emergence of a threshold or actual nuclear weapons state or use military force against it. Second, by acting unilaterally at this point, the United States would make itself rather than Iran the issue. In this vein, imposing unilateral sanctions would hurt Iran but not enough to make it alter the basics of its nuclear program. Third, voting the agreement down and calling for a reopening of negotiations with the aim of producing a better agreement is not a real option as there would be insufficient international support for so doing. Here, again, the United States would likely isolate itself, not Iran. And fourth, voting down the agreement would reinforce questions and doubts around the world as to American political divisions and

dysfunction. Reliability and predictability are essential attributes for a great power that must at one and the same time both reassure and deter.

The alternative to voting against the agreement is obviously to vote for it. The problem with a simple vote that defeats a resolution of disapproval and that expresses unconditional support of the JCPOA is that it does not address the serious problems the agreement either exacerbated or failed to resolve.

So let me suggest a third path. What I would encourage members to explore is whether a vote for the pact (against a resolution of disapproval) could be associated or linked with policies designed to address and compensate for the weaknesses and likely adverse consequences of the agreement. I can imagine such assurances in the form of legislation voted on by the Congress and signed by the president or a communication from the president to the Congress, possibly followed up by a joint resolution. Whatever the form, it would have to deal with either what the United States would not tolerate or what the United States would do in the face of Iranian non-compliance with the recent agreement, Iran's long-term nuclear growth, and Iranian regional activities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for asking me to meet with you and your colleagues here today. I of course look forward to any questions or comments you may have.