



A Problem of Nuclear Proportions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The proposed agreement with Iran is very bad. We should bear in mind that Iran's leaders openly state that Israel must be destroyed, calling it a "one-bomb state." But the truth is that even without using nuclear arms against Israel, a nuclear Iran will make the Middle East far more dangerous.

Tension over the Iranian nuclear program is at an all-time high. Among the reasons for this tension are the framework agreement between the United States and Iran, which is supposedly nearing completion, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the American Congress early next week, during which he will speak against the agreement and against the will of President Barack Obama.

Why is the Iranian nuclear program so important? Why is the prime minister of Israel, who knows Israel-U.S. relations so well, willing to risk a head-on conflict with the president of the United States over Iran, of all things? Why is the Iranian threat a matter of prime concern for the State of Israel? The answers to all these questions are complex.

The first question is whether the Iranian regime ever intended, or still intends, to obtain nuclear weapons. This question has been asked for some time, and anyone who has ever worked, or still works, on the issue and is familiar with the information that many of the world's intelligence agencies have gathered has an unequivocal answer to it.

Almost every intelligence agency interprets the Iranians' unrelenting efforts in the same way: Their intention is to obtain nuclear arms. Their efforts to construct a plutogenic reactor and enrich uranium in large amounts, and at

their current level of enrichment, also add up to one thing: Nuclear weapons. There is no other way to explain the herculean efforts they have been engaged in for so many years.

Any disagreements that remain are solely about the timetable. Some claim that in light of the international pressure and the price that Iran is paying, the Iranians are willing to suspend their efforts and are taking care not to engage in arming at present. For this reason, it will take longer than previously thought until they possess nuclear weapons.

Even those who believe in the Iranians' intentions claim that at some unknown point in the future, the Iranians will go back to what they did in the past to obtain a nuclear bomb with a reliable way to launch it.

"Hold on a moment," say those who disagree that the Iranians are headed toward obtaining nuclear arms -- mainly media writers and spokespeople in Israel and around the world. Fifteen or 20 years ago, you said the Iranians would have nuclear weapons within 10 years. It has been 20 years, and there are no such weapons. Perhaps you are mistaken now, as you were then.

Those who say this are ignoring the world's efforts to impede the Iranians' progress. From the moment the world realized Iran was serious about its intention to obtain nuclear arms, it started, with a great deal of Israeli involvement, to stop Iran's race to the bomb, and there were quite a few successes. But these efforts only moved Iran's timetable back. Their desire for nuclear arms remained.

The agreement's supporters deduce from this, that Iran was already a nuclear threshold state. The agreement only moves the threshold farther away and does not make its status any better, so what is wrong with it?

Such a claim is naive. There is an enormous difference between a nuclear threshold state that is in conflict with almost the entire world, which is trying to stop it from becoming such a state, and a nuclear threshold state that has the world's legitimacy. Such legitimacy also prevents countries from using all the methods they used against Iran's nuclear program so far.

In addition, with the agreement in place, the Iranians receive approval from the superpowers, in retrospect, for all the violations they committed -- the construction of an enormous enrichment system, approval to keep much of

what they built on the way to the bomb, and advance approval to go back to using those capabilities almost without restriction until the agreement expires.

Still, claim those who criticize Israel's opposition to the agreement, it is obvious the approaching agreement will gain an additional delay of Iran's progress toward nuclear arms. This claim is almost accurate. It is correct that at best, if Iran does not find a convenient time to violate the agreement, and if the Iranians abide by its conditions throughout the entire time period, the Iranian military project will be put off. But the postponement will be quite limited. It will expire when the agreement does, in another 15 years.

But there is yet another problem. Throughout those years, the deal will give the Iranians legitimacy to continue with all their preparations in the areas that are not in the agreement (such as longer-range and more accurate missiles), so that they will reach the end of the period better prepared to go forward with the nuclear arms project. Fifteen years is a long time for leaders, but in a nation's history it is like the blink of an eye. We must not allow Iran to receive legitimacy for its preparations to possess nuclear arms, such as the violations it has committed so far, in exchange for buying an insignificant amount of time. The price is very high -- too high.

It should be emphasized that there is no chance to restore pressure on Iran once it is stopped. The sanctions will not be applied once more if Iran should renege on the agreement. Therefore, the chances that Iran will renege on the agreement are great.

The second important question that should be asked is: Assuming that Iran is striving toward nuclear arms, what is the risk?

After all, the Iranians know if they use nuclear weapons, Israel will destroy them, since everyone is certain Israel has the ability to destroy Iran and that Iran's leaders are rational people who will not endanger their own country's existence. Both sides in the Cold War had nuclear weapons, and did not use them. If this mutual deterrence worked between Moscow and Washington, why should it not work between Tehran and Jerusalem?

First, we should bear in mind that Iran's leaders state openly that Israel must be destroyed. Some of them have said so bluntly and clearly, while others have used oblique expressions that can be explained away to the world. They say so not only publicly but also privately. Some claim these statements are

for external consumption. This view, which seems too optimistic and groundless, ignores history and the Iranians' own actions.

There have been people in the past who said that they intended to destroy the Jews -- and they tried to do so despite the prevalent belief that their statements were only words. But beyond that, it is obvious the Iranians are working according to an organized plan.

For example, when the Iranians were first starting to work on long-range missiles, they demanded a minimum range of 1,300 kilometers. A range of only 1,000 kilometers was not enough for them. A precise examination shows that those 300 additional kilometers gave them one thing only: complete coverage of the State of Israel. Herein lies the difference between the Cold War and the situation that will materialize the moment the Iranians possess nuclear arms.

A senior Iranian official put this very well when he said that "Israel is a one-bomb state." Since Israel is so small and its population so concentrated, the basis of his statement is obvious. In comparison, Iran is a huge country with a scattered population. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it would be a mistake to make Israel's existence dependent on the judgment of Shiite clerics who live in a large country, who believe that for a specific price they can be rid of tiny Israel, and no person in Israel can rely on the assumption that decision-makers in Iran are rational. Too often we have failed to understand their logic and have been wrong about them. It is highly problematic to borrow the lessons of the Cold War and apply them to the relationship between Israel and Iran.

But the truth is that even without using nuclear arms against Israel, a nuclear Iran will make the Middle East a much more dangerous place in at least two ways. One way is the significance of Iran's "nuclear umbrella" over the leadership of terrorist groups and hostile countries. It is obvious that Hezbollah would thrive in such a situation, while Israel would not be able to respond or prevent it from acting even when it felt threatened. The decision-makers would constantly be second-guessing about Iranian involvement and the possibility of getting into a conflict with a nuclear superpower. Under this umbrella the terrorist groups could grow far more dangerous in terms of conventional weapons and act against Israel around its borders and throughout the world. The Iranians and their allies have planned dozens of

acts of global terrorism in recent years, and this sort of umbrella would enable them to act much more brazenly.

On the second, broader plane, it is clear Iran would become the leading regional superpower. Whether the rumors are true that this is the direction in which the U.S. is heading and that Washington intends to build up relations with Iran far beyond the agreement, to the point of building a regional alliance with it, Iran would have decisive influence in the region.

Iran's status would grow extremely strong once it succeeded in getting the U.S. permission to become a nuclear threshold state. This influence would have significant implications for the future of the Middle East, since Iran is the first of the region's countries to be ruled by clerics, and it will do everything it can to propagate its own world view. The stronger Iran becomes the more anyone who dreams of seeing the Middle East moving away from totalitarianism and toward democracy can forget about it. But beyond that, the important Sunni states in the Middle East will act to protect themselves. They will lose all trust in the U.S., which surrendered to Iran's trickery in the talks, and will act to obtain nuclear arms for themselves. These countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, and perhaps others, will never agree to go on without nuclear capability when the leading Shiite state possesses it.

A Middle East in which four Muslim countries possess nuclear weapons will be difficult to keep calm in order to stave off disaster. The risk that such arms could reach the hands of terrorist elements would grow significantly greater as well. Beyond that, from a global perspective, we would have to consider that a Middle East with nuclear weapons would call into question the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is considered to have prevented the spread of nuclear arms.

Two more questions remain unanswered. The first is: How did we get into this situation? Did the U.S.-led sanctions not bring Iran into negotiations when it was almost on its knees? The second is: What can still be done?

It seems that the source of the talks' failure, which is reminiscent of the failure of the U.S.'s talks with North Korea, lies in the Iranians realizing two things during the negotiations. First, the Iranians realized that even though the American president said all options were on the table and even built a credible military option, the U.S. had no desire to use that option, no matter what. The absence of a stick in the negotiating room lifted a great deal of

pressure off the Iranians. The second realization came in the form of a statement from a White House spokesperson that an agreement with Iran would be the president's greatest success during his term.

This statement, together with the superpowers' acceptance of Iran's main demands regarding the continued existence of their enrichment capability, led the Iranians to the conclusion that the U.S. wanted an agreement more than Iran needed one.

The realization that the American desire for an agreement is at any price contributed to Iran's near-uncompromising stance. The Americans helped the Iranians a great deal in the talks by not intensifying the sanctions that had created difficulties for Iran. Keeping the sanctions at their level, without increasing them, released a great deal of internal pressure in Iran. The result is a good agreement -- for Iran.

The question of what can be done now is harder to answer. First, we must make it clear in every way possible that, although only some specifics of the agreement have been made public, the agreement is obviously a bad one. The Iranians give up no capability in their possession; they only postpone their intention to fulfill those capabilities. The Israeli government must show the agreement's weaknesses fully while explaining the danger it poses to Israel, to the Middle East and to the whole world. In the spirit of cooperation that is acceptable to the Americans, not a word of the closed talks with them must be divulged, but we must also not be shy about attacking the agreement on the basis of the material that is reported in the media and on the basis of the knowledge that Israel has from its own sources.

At the end of the day, Israel must make it clear it has not signed the agreement and is not bound by it. In the future, Israel must formulate its policy on the basis that "a bad agreement is worse than no agreement," "all options are on the table" and "Israel must protect itself on its own."

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