

The Decisive Stage of Nuclear Talks with Iran: Will Diplomacy Deliver?

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Reality Check

The second target date for concluding a comprehensive deal between the P5+1 and Iran was postponed yet again, and following the November 2014 failure to formulate an agreement, the new date agreed on was June 30, 2015. April 2, 2015 saw the announcement in Lausanne of a framework for a comprehensive agreement, with three months to sign the deal. Underlying the difficulty in shaking hands and finalizing the deal, however, is a clash of strategic goals between the negotiating sides, namely: attaining vs. preventing Iran from attaining military nuclear capability.¹

Iran's intransigence regarding a comprehensive agreement can be pinpointed more precisely in the February 2015 report by the IAEA Director-General to the organization's Board of Governors regarding, inter alia, the implementation of measures under the Joint Statement on a Framework for Cooperation, and more importantly, under the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA). Some crucial findings of this safeguards report should be scrutinized in order to better understand what the current status is of Iran's pledge to cooperate. Some would argue that one of the most tangible achievements since the JPOA took effect, acknowledged by the report itself, is the fact that Iran has not enriched uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) above 5 percent U-235 at any of its declared enrichment facilities. Another major development deals with the IR-40 heavy water reactor in Arak. According to the report, no additional major components have been installed at the IR-40 reactor and there has been no manufacture and testing of fuel for the reactor.²

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But these achievements, if noble and to some extent reflecting the art of the possible, are liable to ring hollow in the long run – not only because the process of enrichment is still ongoing in Iran and the reactor in Arak was not dismantled as demanded by Israel, but mainly because of some other key findings stressed by the report.

The first is the number and level of sophistication of the centrifuges and Iran's potential desire to lower the maximum separative power of its cascades, in other words its enrichment capacity, in order to keep more of them in place and operational mode. The second is the production of near 20 percent uranium oxide concentrate and the risk of its potential reprocessing back to UF₆ which can be used for further enrichment and finally weaponized. Last but not least is the issue of the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program, which remains unknown due to Iran's reticence in this regard, a true riddle wrapped in a mystery. All these disturbing issues bear discussion and are therefore more broadly addressed in the next section.

Technical Conundrums

Imposing crippling limitations on the number and level of sophistication of the centrifuges already installed in Iran should be an issue of utmost importance as the talks proceed. As of this writing, Iran is believed to operate approximately 10,000 IR-1 centrifuges out of a total of almost 18,000 centrifuges installed at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant, Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant, and Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.³ In theory, an average enrichment capacity of the IR-1 centrifuge should oscillate between 0.7-1 separative work unit (SWU) per year. Given the number of the IR-1 centrifuges already installed and operating in Iran, the estimated cumulative enrichment capacity of all such equipped cascades should be approximately 7,000-10,000 SWU per year. Since Iran has until now observed the limitations concerning the level of enrichment as stated in the JPOA – not to enrich above 5 percent U-235 – at least officially, it would take about 1,500 SWU to produce a weapon-equivalent of 90 percent enriched uranium from such low enriched uranium. Therefore, the length of time that would be required to do this with the currently operating 10,000 IR-1 centrifuges and with their cumulative enrichment output of 7,000-10,000 SWU per year is three to four months.⁴ This “overt breakout” is a strategic trap, for it offers the most probable pathway to nuclear military capability if Iran decides not to cooperate and expel IAEA inspectors in the future. Put

differently, since the P5+1 is not seeking to eliminate any Iranian breakout capability, but merely to constrain the time in which it will become aware of such breakout capability, an adequate time framework for the international community to mobilize, act, and avert contagious proliferation in the region is of strategic importance and should be at least a year, if not more.

Iran, however, has another path to pursue further enrichment and ultimately acquire nuclear military capability. This option, called “covert breakout,” should not be underestimated. In this scenario, more efficient centrifuges, especially IR-2m, IR-4, IR-5, and IR-6, would potentially be in play. The longer Iran is permitted to conduct research and development activities on advanced centrifuges, the smaller a clandestine enrichment facility is needed, thus lowering the probability of detection.⁵

Another strategic and probably not sufficiently stressed challenge for the future of the nuclear negotiations is the size of Iran’s stock of near 20 percent enriched uranium that is kept in the form of oxide powder, in other words, uranium mass. Theory has it that such uranium oxide concentrate shall undergo a series of processes so it can produce a usable fuel and finally be used in a nuclear reactor in order to generate electricity.⁶ So far, so good. The missed point, however, is the following: since Iran began conversion at its declared facilities, it has fed into the process line at the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant at Esfahan 337.2 kilograms of UF₆ enriched up to 20 percent U-235 and produced 162.8 kilograms of near 20 percent enriched uranium in the form of oxide powder, or uranium mass, but only some of it has been used to produce fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. In fact, if such chemical form of enriched uranium is not irradiated in the reactor, it can be returned to its previous gaseous form, or UF₆, and finally enriched further toward weapons grade.⁷ It might be somewhat satisfying that such an amount would probably not be sufficient to fuel more than one nuclear weapon, but the fact is that Iran’s ongoing latent possession of near 20 percent enriched uranium, be it in the form of oxide concentrate, is anything but a false alarm.

As for the last technical issue addressed in this chapter, based on previous experience, the probability of having the military aspects of Iran’s nuclear program cleared and sufficiently answered by Iran is rather low. Not only have Iranian officials reportedly dismissed IAEA requests to interview those suspected of involvement in various fields of this vital issue, but Iran continues to deny the IAEA access to the Parchin military complex, where testing on nuclear detonators is believed to have occurred. Based

on satellite images and intelligence data, Iran, in addition to stonewalling investigators, has repeatedly made some substantial changes to the facility and to the surrounding grounds.⁸

Since uranium enrichment and the possible military dimensions are interfacing elements, it would be a strategic mistake to sidestep the latter at expense of the former in a potential comprehensive agreement. For that reason the Parchin military complex represents a key problem to the IAEA in resolving its concerns about Iran's past and allegedly ongoing nuclear weapons-related activities. More broadly, for there to be a final deal, confidence building measures should be established between the negotiating sides. Without addressing allegations of Iran's work on nuclear weapons-related issues such as nuclear warhead design; explosive tests; and calculations related to neutron transport and their application to compressed materials, the P5+1 cannot and will not be able to construct an adequate verification regime capable of detecting illicit activities at Iran's clandestine military sites.⁹

If regional hegemony based on nuclear power is Iran's strategic objective, then its research in the field of ballistic missiles, which is intrinsically linked with the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program, is a means to reach such a goal on a tactical level. A massive arsenal of ballistic missiles in Iran's possession presents a clear danger not only to Israel, but to Western targets in the region at large, as well as to Arab sheikdoms. Due to Iran's current military posture, as well as historical reasons and

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ideological outlooks, the country is unable to acquire spare parts for its predominantly Western military hardware. Thus, in order to compensate for lagging behind in conventional warfare, Iran has chosen to focus on a gradual but methodical expansion of its ballistic missile arsenal as well as on its asymmetric warfare capabilities.¹⁰

That Iran's ballistic missile program is not receiving the same level of international scrutiny as its nuclear program is a matter of fact. But the opposite should be true. Going nuclear and going ballistic at the same time provides a certain level

of intimidation that Iran can use both to heighten the power and to deter conventional responses to its asymmetric capabilities. Here advanced delivery systems are of particular concern. Those that are deployed or

have reached final development include the storable liquid fueled set of Shahab missiles with the range exceeding 2,000 kilometers, thus easily reaching Israeli soil.

Based on the real world operation accuracy of such systems, most or all conventional warheads cannot be used against any point target. But if replaced with nuclear warheads the potential lethality of such missiles would cease to depend on precise targeting. Quite the opposite: sheer chance would suffice to cause enormous damage. In such a scenario Israel might find it extremely difficult to use its proficiency in airpower and multi-layered air defense system to suppress a successful random hit.¹¹ That is the reason why the umbilical linkage between nuclear and ballistic issues should somehow be reflected in the current talks and a final deal.

Great Debate

Notwithstanding the crucial role the technicalities play in the negotiations, it seems that Iran's nuclear program is also about different perceptions of the margins of threat between Israel and the United States, the leading power of the P5+1. It would probably be quite irresponsible to call it a pure hawkish vs. dovish approach disagreement. But it might be useful to recall the main tenets of the first Great International Relations Theory Debate in order to understand where the Israeli and the US establishments stand now and where they differ; that they differ is matter of fact.

Many international relations scholars would agree that the First Great International Relations Theory Debate is mainly about national interest and international cooperation as the basic notions of the two camps. While some might think that power assures survival and strength boosts safety, others might trust more in cooperation and multilateralism.

It seems that the Obama administration, and more specifically the US State Department, is at least aware of this cleavage since its approach during the talks is based on cooperation, inclusiveness, and partnerships, and almost excludes unilateralism. Indeed, the US establishment deems the best way to resolve the nuclear crisis is diplomacy, i.e., through a comprehensive and durable agreement that all parties can agree to. And that is not just because diplomacy is the preferred course, but because it is also the most effective course.¹² Make no mistake, the strategic objective of the US is to halt Iran's ambitions to become a nuclear state, but what divides the US perspective from the Israeli one is how to do so. According to the US administration, achieving a lasting diplomatic solution would help

preserve international unity.¹³ In addition, in return for Iran's commitment to place meaningful limits on its nuclear program, the P5+1 committed to provide Iran with limited, targeted, and reversible sanctions relief, with the US government retaining the authority to revoke this limited sanctions relief at any time if Iran fails to meet its commitments under the JPOA.¹⁴ Put differently, in order to reach the goal, the US is prepared to offer incentives and concessions in exchange for cooperation, and preserve the regional balance in the Middle East. This, however, converges with the Israeli, and for that matter more realistic, perspective of the whole issue. For Israel, any comprehensive agreement that would allow uranium enrichment based on centrifuges, regardless of the number of the centrifuges already installed in Iran, keeping the IR-40 heavy water reactor in Arak – a pathway to a nuclear device based on production of plutonium – untouched, as well as omitting the possible military dimensions from the negotiations is a bad deal.

Many argue that absent Israel's international lobbying, its preparedness to present a credible military option, and intelligence gathering, Iran would probably have obtained nuclear weapons several years ago. Since Israel is the party most directly threatened by Iran's nuclear program, Israel adopted its position a long time ago and appears to remain resolutely opposed to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The US seems less adamant in its opposition, and here lies the strategic difference in the worldviews of Israel and the US regarding the vital aspects of the talks, namely: enrichment

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and breakout. Put succinctly, while the US deems a nuclear-threshold Iran a viable option in exchange for bringing Iran on board to efforts to stabilize the Middle East, Israel sees any threshold status of Iran as a strategic or even existential threat from the long run perspective.¹⁵ However, a certain divergence or gradual alienation of interests between the two strategic partners is not completely new and has a limited, if very sober, track record. This time the basic difference stems from the fact that the US, unlike Israel, does not feel that its homeland security is threatened by Iran. Moreover, given the trauma the US troops suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is

scant wonder that the incumbent administration does not feel that another US military engagement is a workable option. Thus, a nuclear Iran might at the end of the day bother the US allies in the region, especially Egypt and

some Arab monarchies, and may even be regarded as an existential threat by Israel, but unless the United States feels a nuclear Iran is a threat for its domestic stability, it would very probably reject the perception of it as an imminent and concrete danger.¹⁶ Understanding this crucial reality as well as the implications of the First Great International Relations Theory Debate might reveal the rationale behind the current dynamics of the nuclear talks.

While it may be true that Israel's maximalist positions on the issue might have been overshadowed by the political and media urgency that the so-called Islamic State – ISIS – threat commanded, it is not in Israel's best interest to shy away from expressing its view on the global arena, let alone acquiesce to any final agreement that will have implications not only for Israel, but for the region and for global security.¹⁷

In fact, Israel's likely best ally in the current situation might be the incumbent US Congress and especially the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, insofar as it shares much of Israel's perspective on Iran's nuclear program developments. According to the committee, Iran has violated the spirit of the JPOA on several occasions, first and foremost by feeding UF₆ gas into IR-5 centrifuges installed at the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz. The argument that the IR-5 centrifuge had not previously been fed with UF₆, and thus no violation of the JPOA has been committed, is itself worthy of ridicule. Under the JPOA Iran's centrifuge enrichment program is supposed to be frozen and no further advancements at the pilot plant shall occur.¹⁸ Moreover, in December 2014, the UN panel of experts that monitor sanctions compliance said in a report that Iran has been illicitly trying to buy technology for the IR-40 reactor in Arak, which, as originally designed, would serve as a plutonium track facility and has been referred to by experts as a bomb-making factory because of the quantity of plutonium output. Since under the interim agreement Iran agreed to make no further advances in the construction at Arak, this revelation is extremely disturbing. All these acts are clearly considered to be provocative by the committee and contravene the spirit of the interim deal. No wonder that the US Congress would like to play more important role in the whole process and give its own approval of a final deal, should there be one.¹⁹ It is therefore incumbent on Israel to use all the diplomatic and political tools at its disposal to cooperate with Congress if it seeks to halt the signing of an accord that is not in its best interest.

Strategic Options

The schism between Israel and the US concerning the negotiations about Iran's nuclear program is but part of a broader picture and may thus result in different actions on the ground. In his speech before a joint session of Congress in March 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu revealed two significant gaps in the US and Israeli approaches not only to Iran but to the entire Middle East. First, the question of priorities is answered differently on both sides. While for Israel a common approach to Iran's breakout capability would be a priority, the US would prefer to focus on defeating ISIS and treat Iran as a subsumed problem of a broader picture. Second, Israeli intelligence services warn that the time necessary for the creation of an Iranian nuclear device would be less than the year estimated by the P5+1.²⁰

The Prime Minister's speech before the US legislative body suggests that the threat perception of Israel and the US with regard to Iran's nuclear program is not the same. Moreover, support for Hizbollah by a nuclear-based Iran might mean the advent of yet another strategic debate, a debate that would praise the necessity of interoperability within and beyond IDF, as well as an adequate balance between offensive and defensive capabilities, including hybrid ones. In other words, the greater the probability of a nuclear Iran, the greater the chance for asymmetric Hizbollah strikes against Israel and its targets, for Hizbollah is a serious opponent that appears in the middle of the range of military operations. Thus, an IDF exclusive focus on either low intensity conflict warfare or high intensity conflict warfare might prove irresponsible and dangerous. The IDF should be capable of combined joint arms fire and ground maneuver in order to address the so called "full spectrum rainbow of conflict." Hybrid capabilities should also encompass intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance platforms heavily based on UAVs, including INFOOPS and PSYOPS. Last but not least, the importance of conventional forces based on tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and the incorporation of close air support should not be underestimated either.

Thus, the ideal course of action Israel should undertake includes enhancing the inner debate about military planning. On the political and strategic level two types of planning come into play: future-oriented advance planning and ad hoc crisis response planning. With regard to Iran's nuclear program Israel should focus on advance planning and never underestimate crisis response planning. Given the time of austerity and limited resources Israel should also continue to pay attention to interoperability within its own forces and beyond. Combined joint exercises among units, branches,

and even countries is probably the best way to achieve at least minimal level of interoperability with NATO armies. Israel should therefore build on its experience of combined joint exercises and intelligence data fusion with NATO countries. For instance, practicing different complex air-to-air scenarios, with a combination of aerial refueling, protecting strategic assets, and dealing with unexpected threats in the sky might improve the ability of the Israel Air Force to speak the same flight language with their Western counterparts in the case of necessity. Given the difficulty of predicting the future, Israel should also maintain the high level of flexibility and adaptability of its forces. Bearing in mind that the P5+1 will very likely continue to regard the negotiations track and economic sanctions as the most viable option of dealing with Iran, with other coercive measures constituting – at least for the time being – a red line not to be crossed, Israel should pursue more intensive lobbying and improve the presentation of its case.

Conclusion

While the nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran have demonstrated enormous complexity, for Israel, the strategic implications are quite straightforward. Provided a deal is reached by June 30, 2015, particularly a deal ignoring some crucial aspects mentioned above, Israel is on its own and should probably start rethinking its military posture and adjusting its strategic doctrine. If another extension takes place, Israel and the world should be prepared for the second longest set of negotiations without producing a fruitful settlement, second only to the Middle East peace process. Since Israel and the US as the leading power of the P5+1 do not share the common threat perception with regard to a nuclear Iran, it should be in Israel's best interest to focus on boosting regional partnerships with other NATO countries and not give up political pressure in various international forums.

Ignoring Iran's historical marginality in the Middle East might be a strategic failure of the West. However, the ongoing victimization of the Iranians and constant concessions to their vision of a final deal is strategic charlatanism. Since Iran is playing an asymmetric game for time, this stage is vital and the voice of Israel should be heard. Should there or should there not be a deal, Iran would very probably remain a latent nuclear power able to enrich uranium. Regional consequences that such a scenario would have are now uncertain. But it seems that in order to salvage the global nonproliferation regime and adopt a right final deal, a lot more

diplomatic resolve will be required. Israel would do well to engage in this fervent diplomatic activity at this point of time, lest the world faces a new a strategic abyss.

Notes

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