

A Gloomy Forecast Borne out by the Flawed Iran Deal

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Matthew Kroenig

A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014), 256 pp. ISBN: 978-1-13727-953-8

Kenneth M. Pollack

Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 536 pp. ISBN: 978-1-47673-393-7

Seyed Hossein Mousavian

The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 597 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-87003-268-4

ABSTRACT: The Kroenig and Pollack books are poised on opposite sides of a critical policy dilemma. Both admit to the failure of negotiations—at the time of their respective writing—to get Iran to back down from the military nuclear ambitions that they both believe, with varying degrees of certainty, Iran harbors. Both express their skepticism regarding the ability to achieve this goal when continuing with the diplomatic approach, and this leads both authors to seriously consider what they at the time both viewed as the final fork in the road in this long and drawn-out process: namely, the decision whether to “bomb Iran” or “live with the bomb.” Mousavian’s book offers a uniquely Iranian perspective on the negotiations. While these books are essential reading for those interested in the history of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and the international efforts to curb Iran’s military nuclear ambitions, they offer no reassurance that negotiations—as a nonproliferation strategy—can stop a determined proliferator.

KEYWORDS: Iran – nuclear – non-proliferation – negotiations – bargaining – diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The picture that emerges from the three books under review—all published between one and three years before the Iran deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) was secured in July 2015—is decidedly dim and discouraging. While they are essential reading for those interested in the history of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and the international efforts to curb Iran's military nuclear ambitions, these books offer no reassurance as to the ability of negotiations—as a nonproliferation strategy—to stop a determined proliferator. The only author who is no doubt highly satisfied with the JCPOA is Mousavian, as his analysis and recommendations find clear expression in what the parties ultimately agreed to. Iran has consistently denied the existence of any military ambitions in the nuclear realm, and the deal did not force the regime to face its deceptive past. So the emphatic Iranian claim that the country was subjected to “illegitimate” harshness by the international community was not undermined, which unfortunately weakened P5+1 leverage, and their ability to negotiate a better deal.

Indeed, for more than a decade, Iran played to its best advantage the extremely difficult conditions that the international community faces when it attempts to deal with a determined nuclear proliferator by means of diplomacy. The task is especially challenging when international negotiators find themselves up against a proliferator that has already invested considerable resources in its nuclear program, and paid a high price—in sanctions and isolation—for its efforts. Such a proliferator has no interest in a deal that would mean giving up its gains, which explains why Iran for years abused the negotiations setting in order to play for time to advance its military capability. Iran quite successfully exploited the difficulty for the other side to poke holes in its steadfast narrative that maintains that all of its nuclear activities are part of a legitimate civilian program, a narrative that Iran continues to advance post-deal. Because of the way the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is formulated, the international negotiators struggled for years to produce “smoking gun” evidence of Iran's military work that would have increased their leverage at a much earlier—and potentially more effective—stage of the negotiations.

The Kroenig and Pollack books easily invite a comparison in that they are poised on opposite sides of a critical policy dilemma. Both admit to the failure of negotiations—at the time of their respective writing—to get Iran to back down from the military nuclear ambitions that they both believe, with varying degrees of certainty, Iran harbors. Both express their skepticism regarding

the ability to achieve this goal when continuing with the diplomatic approach, and this leads both authors to seriously consider what they at the time both viewed as the final fork in the road in this long and drawn-out process: namely, the decision whether to “bomb Iran” or “live with the bomb.”

Mousavian’s book is of a different nature—it offers a uniquely Iranian perspective on the negotiations, providing an insider’s perspective on the nuclear crisis as it unfolded from 2003. Mousavian describes at length Iran’s trials and tribulations, and many grievances, with the aim of exposing where the international powers have gone wrong in their attempt to deal with Iran through diplomacy, although he is also quite critical of the approach adopted by the ninth government that came to power in Iran in 2005. The criticism of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s approach is not too surprising, and it’s personal: Mousavian was the spokesman for the Iranian team that negotiated from 2003 to 2005, during Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, and he was later arrested for political reasons during the years when Ahmadinejad was president.

Mousavian rejects the premise that Iran has worked on a military nuclear program or ever violated the NPT. Nevertheless, embedded in Mousavian’s introduction is the following sentence: “There is no credible evidence that Iran has made the final decision to acquire nuclear weapons—as distinct from acquiring a nuclear weapon option,” which could imply that he perhaps accepts that there is evidence to support work on a military nuclear option. It’s not clear. What is clear is that Mousavian twists the fact that Iran currently has no nuclear weapons to mean that any steps to limit Iran’s nuclear program are almost by definition unjustifiable and illegitimate. But of course that is exactly the catch in the nuclear realm: work on a nuclear device must be stopped *in the making*, because once a state achieves nuclear weapons status, it is too late to do anything about it.

In addition, Mousavian’s portrayal of the negotiations proceeds on the assumption that the talks involve two parties with equally legitimate claims that are trying to carve out a mutually satisfactory deal. He places the onus for the failure to do so (up to the time of his writing) on the Western states that tried to force Iran to compromise using threats and pressure. For him, the most important change that had to occur is for the two parties to be negotiating on equal footing. The problem with this reading is that the P5+1–Iran negotiations lacked the element of “equal foot-

1. The “P5+1” or “EU3+3” includes China, France, Germany, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

ing.” They were fundamentally about compelling Iran, as an NPT violator, to adhere to the treaty. As such, the negotiation was never between parties with equally legitimate claims, or with an equal responsibility to make concessions to the other. But looking back at Mousavian’s book from the vantage point of the deal that was finally secured, unfortunately Iran was successful in advancing its distorted narrative, represented by Mousavian. The P5+1 seem to have accepted the unwarranted demand for symmetry, and the resulting concessions that they made to Iran are what produced a dangerously flawed agreement—one that does not preclude Iran from attaining a military nuclear capability down the road, at a time of its choosing.

Moreover, this negotiation was always about driving a hard bargain in a situation where the interests of the two parties were pretty much zero-sum: Iran demonstrated over the course of 2014 its keen desire to hold on to its nuclear breakout status, while the stated goal of the P5+1 was to ensure Iran could never become a nuclear weapons state. In this setup, there was actually no shared goal, nor was there a win-win solution. Only one party could get what it said it wanted. Mousavian of course rejects this portrayal, but his account ends up being more about exposing how Iran successfully exploited loopholes in the NPT, and rejected US attempts to dictate its rights—and it was this behavior that enabled Iran to get where it is today: on the verge of a nuclear weapons capability, legitimized by the international community through the July 2015 JCPOA.

Iran’s successful maneuvering has undermined the viability of diplomacy and negotiations as a serious policy option for curbing its military ambitions. The deal that was struck with Iran is highly problematic—at best, it will keep Iran a year from breakout to a bomb for a period of ten to fifteen years—and there is absolutely no indication that Iran made a strategic turn away from its military nuclear ambitions. Instead, the deal will rely for success on its ability to spark a very quick identification/decision/action sequence of events following any suspected violation. In reality, this series of decisions will face serious constraints at almost every turn, and will no doubt be anything but quick. It is highly debatable whether the terms of the deal will succeed in stopping Iran at a critical future stage. The collective message for global nuclear nonproliferation efforts is dire: when confronting determined and dangerous proliferators in the post-Cold War era, negotiations are unlikely to succeed in getting these proliferators to reverse course. The experience of negotiating with North Korea helps drive this message home.

YES, A NUCLEAR IRAN WOULD POSE A VERY
DANGEROUS THREAT

Kroenig and Pollack both agree that by using the time it gained over twelve years of on-again, off-again negotiations in order to advance its nuclear infrastructure, Iran brought the world to the brink of the ultimate choice between “bombing Iran” or “accepting the bomb.” Both authors draw heavily on the background and implications of this choice, and yet they advance very different policy recommendations: Kroenig makes a strong case for ultimately employing targeted US military force, while Pollack lays out the blueprint for a strategy of US containment of a nuclear Iran.

The difference in their policy prescriptions, as Pollack correctly points out in his own analysis, has more to do with how each perceives the severity of the threat of a nuclear Iran, than it does with their respective analyses of what transpired up until the time of writing (which, for Mousavian, who believes a better negotiation is possible, is the major focus of attention).

So how dangerous would Iran with nuclear weapons be? Pollack tends to reduce the nuclear threat primarily to the question of whether Iran is likely to actually use nuclear weapons. For Kroenig, however, even if the answer to that question is that it is unlikely, the scenario of Iran becoming a nuclear weapons capable state is still regarded as tremendously dangerous; Kroenig lays out the full range of negative implications in Chapter 5 of his book. Worst of all—the outcome would be irreversible.

How do we know that a nuclear Iran would be so dangerous? Because of what we already know about Iran’s behavior and motives: in particular, the fact that Iran has deceived the international community for decades by working on a secret military nuclear program in direct and blatant violation of the NPT, and its profile as an aggressive and hegemonic regional actor. If Iran is enabled to acquire nuclear weapons after years of international efforts to stop that very outcome, it would of course paint a very sorry picture of the NPT and those tasked with enforcing it. And it would embolden Iran, who would most likely feel vindicated in light of its victory over “global arrogance,” and its ability to out-manuever the collective efforts of the most powerful states in the world—those states that had sought to dictate behavior to Iran, and strip it of “its rights.” Iran’s years of deception would be repackaged as an imperative in light of the global attempt to “keep it down.” Iran would emerge victorious in its own eyes and would sell this as a victory for all downtrodden states.

Of particular concern is that Iran is an *offensively oriented proliferator*. While always quick to present itself as the wronged and injured party, the reality

is that Iran is a long-time violator of the NPT and a regional menace. Iran strongly supports terrorist proxies, is exerting its power and influence across the region, and rejects Israel's place in the Middle East. Iran's Supreme Leader, 'Ali Khamenei, has said on numerous occasions during the months of negotiations on a comprehensive nuclear deal that the only "solution" for Israel is for it to be annihilated. Iran aspires to regional hegemony, and attaining nuclear status would grant it a significant degree of immunity from coercive countermeasures by international powers seeking to limit Iranian aggression in the Middle East. This would enable Iran to use its power in the region and beyond in even more threatening ways. While most analysts trained in neorealism during the past thirty years are conditioned to seek the security-based motivation for a state to go nuclear—namely, the threat that the proliferator is "obviously" trying to deter—for some states, the primary motivation lies elsewhere, in an offensively oriented drive for enhanced regional power. This is the more convincing motive in Iran's case, which is underscored by the lesson that it drew from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) attack on Libya in 2011: if you give up weapons of mass destruction (WMD), you set yourself up for attack when the West disapproves of your behavior. In other words, WMD are quite useful as protection against any countermeasure that the international community might contemplate in response to Iran's future aggressions.

The situation is not much better at the global level. While Iran does have an interest in being reintegrated in the global economy for the economic benefits it could gain, it is also clearly interested in expanding its power and influence worldwide. The current regime in Iran shows no interest in cultivating a better relationship with the United States, and Khamenei makes no secret of his continued hatred and contempt for America. Iran "played" the nuclear negotiations as a game of hardball—a contest of wills that would ultimately expose who is weak and who is strong. Western concessions were regarded by Iran as indications of weakness, and it was loath to make any of its own. Although the Iranians continually demand respect, they never responded favorably to the efforts of the Obama administration to display fairness in its approach, avoiding language that might be construed as disrespectful of Iran. Rather than showing appreciation for these efforts, Khamenei mocked the United States, and America's fair play approach was exploited in the ongoing battle of wills. Over the course of 2014–2015, in particular, every US attempt to show Iran respect was answered with a metaphoric slap in the face by Khamenei. Every US concession became the platform for continued Iranian intransigence, and new demands at the negotiating table.

EXPOSING IRAN'S MILITARY AMBITIONS

As noted, Kroenig and Pollack both engage in policy-oriented research focused specifically on the question of whether the better policy option at the final stage of the game would be to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities in an effort to set back the program for the long term, or to accept that Iran will become a nuclear state, and devise a policy of containment to deal with it. And they offer different threat assessments regarding the scenario of a nuclear Iran. But when comparing the work of the two authors, they also agree on quite a lot: that Iran is determined to acquire a military nuclear capability (although Pollack states that his personal experience in the Iraq case has made him cautious regarding intelligence on Iran); that the chance that negotiations will produce a result that resolves the crisis is very slim; and that for these reasons a fork in the road will soon be inevitable, and the choice will be between two bad options. Mousavian is certainly not on the same page with regard to Iran's military ambitions, or the sense that negotiations would not work.

Interestingly, if the international community had been on the same page as Kroenig and Pollack regarding Iran's military ambitions, especially in the 2005–2009 period when Iran's program was much less advanced, international negotiators may have had more success in conducting the negotiations. But Iran's narrative consistently rejected the notion that it had any intention of moving in the direction of a military nuclear capability. The regime claimed that it never worked on a military program (despite all the evidence to the contrary) and that nuclear weapons are against their religious beliefs. Regime officials often cite a religious fatwa (that no one seems to be able to produce) that prohibits nuclear weapons, and Mousavian mentions this *fatwa* as the main reason why he does not believe that Iran is attempting to acquire a nuclear bomb.

Curiously, the P5+1 negotiators over the course of 2014–2015 were reluctant to squarely confront Iran on its suspected weaponization activities, although this would have been their strongest card in support of their initial demand for massive dismantlement of Iran's nuclear program. Instead of recognizing the value of exposing Iran's ongoing narrative as blatantly false, they preferred to frame this issue as if it would be forcing a humiliating confession from Iran, which they were reluctant to do. Moreover, the international community was desperately holding on to the idea that negotiations could produce the desired result. They clung to this even though there was less and less evidence to support it as the negotiations proceeded, especially when the P5+1 resisted adopting a tough stance in the face of Iran's continued

intransigence and began making concessions instead. Indeed, the leverage that the P5+1 had worked so hard to put in place with the biting sanctions of 2012 was not used effectively at the bargaining table, and gradually diminished, and with it any chance of securing a good nuclear deal.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THAT FORK IN THE ROAD?

The negotiations that took place over the course of 2014–2015 gradually demonstrated that the P5+1 had become so committed to a diplomatic outcome—almost any outcome—that the choice deliberated at such length by both Kroenig and Pollack was no longer relevant. Any expectation that such a policy review and/or choice would be made by the Obama administration became increasingly detached from realities on the ground. Indeed, what had seemed a realistic policy dilemma as late as early 2014, when Kroenig published his book, was rendered an illusion by the end of that year. Reading Kroenig's book in late 2014, what was most striking about his analysis was how irrelevant the central dilemma that he poses had become, and in such a short time. Military force was no longer part of the debate or anywhere on the agenda. Even though the official US line whereby “all options remain on the table” was never officially overturned, Obama's positions and policies sent a very different message. When the sense coming from the White House was a keen desire to move to *détente* with Iran, was anyone seriously contemplating declaring the nuclear negotiations to have failed—no matter what?

The P5+1 ultimately agreed to a bad nuclear deal, which enables Iran to maintain a breakout capability, and to significantly bolster it after fifteen years. This will in effect enable Iran to move to a military capability at a time of its choosing. It was clear that the P5+1 were moving in this direction from about mid-2014, certainly after the initial six-month deadline for achieving a comprehensive deal was crossed. Thus, acquiescence to an inevitable Iranian nuclear capability emerged as the *de facto* sole default option. Not only was there no serious deliberation about the choice between living with an Iranian bomb or bombing Iran's nuclear facilities, but “war” was propped up as the nasty alternative to any deal, and it was framed as the worst possible outcome. No discussion. Moreover, anyone daring to question the course of negotiations was immediately deemed a “hawk” and “warmonger.”

All of this raises some very serious questions regarding a prospective US containment policy vis-à-vis Iran. Would the United States devote the necessary energy to carving out such a strategy, as Pollack would have us believe, or is there more evidence to support the conclusion that it would not? With discussion in the Obama administration focused more on the benefits of

rapprochement or détente between the United States and Iran—or, at the least, a perceived need to coordinate positions with Iran in the fight against ISIS and in dealing with a host of additional regional challenges—the containment strategy option as laid out by Pollack appears unlikely to be developed at the present time. Quite the contrary, the administration seems to be increasingly viewing Iran as an anchor of stability in the Middle East despite Iran’s very negative regional profile, and a plethora of evidence that points to Iran as a dangerous source of aggression and instability in the Middle East. The desire for a United States–Iran détente could lead to inevitable, and unthinking acceptance of a nuclear-armed Iran, with none of the elements of the containment policy that Pollack has argued for.

A NOTE ON STYLE AND FORM

Before concluding, some comments on style and form. Kroenig’s book reads like a very long op-ed analysis, and the good news in this regard is that he presents a coherent and quite elegant analysis. He takes his readers by the hand and leads them step-by-step from start to finish, presenting arguments and counterarguments, with confidence and control. He includes all the topics that he needs in order to make his case, and does it well. The downside is a lack of attention to the nitty-gritty of style and form, which has left the manuscript looking like the publisher did not take the time to give it a final look. There are annoying repetitions, at times overly emphatic language (“these arguments do not hold any water whatsoever . . .”), and a few stark (even if minor) factual errors that are like the scratches on a record that had previously been playing so smoothly.² Admittedly, most readers will not notice the mistakes, but for the expert, the sloppiness is a decided disappointment, especially as the author builds himself up as an authoritative expert, another element that should probably have been toned down as well; analysis should be left to speak for itself. Both Kroenig and Pollack are also somewhat prone to name-dropping, and in Pollack’s case, unnecessary flattery.

2. See, for example, p. 65, where he has reached 2006 in his historical review and mentions new revelations that came to light about Iran’s program “at about this time,” but the footnote refers to the IAEA report that was released in 2011; or on the following page, where he mentions a Russian proposal introduced in the spring of 2006, when it was actually made in late 2005. A more serious error appears on p. 115, where he provides erroneous estimates of the nuclear arsenals for the known and assumed nuclear states. His footnote cites a very reliable source—the 2013 SIPRI yearbook—but the figures quoted in the book are not the ones that appear in the source.

Pollack's book is thorough and well researched and contains a great deal of valuable and relevant information. Nevertheless, at times the author is prone to over-analysis and to spending too much time on aspects that are not necessary for making his case—such as an Israeli military option—which overburdens and sometimes undermines his analysis. He wants to make the case for containment, but his analysis does not always serve this goal; his hesitations and misgivings sometimes project a lack of satisfaction with his own conclusions. At other times, he makes sweeping statements that certainly may raise an eyebrow or two. Pollack openly admits to having been “burnt” regarding Iraq's WMD programs when serving as a CIA intelligence analyst, which engenders an unfortunate overemphasis on what we might not know with regard to Iran's plans and motivations.

Much of Pollack's analysis is of the “on the one hand, but on the other” type; and while it is intellectually honest to be open about what one does not know, Pollack is writing policy-oriented analysis, and offering a clear policy recommendation. As such, he must inspire trust in his conclusions, especially when dealing with nuclear weapons, which are such a serious and irreversible military capability, especially in the hands of a dangerous proliferator like Iran. The reader is often left with the feeling that if the author is so very unsure of how to read the situation, why should we put any stock in his particular conclusions and policy prescriptions? He could very well be erring on the side of underestimating the threat: not taking the negative implications of a nuclear Iran—that he recognizes—seriously enough, and putting too many question marks on Iran's motives instead of exclamation points.

The value of Mousavian's book is in presenting at length a specifically Iranian perspective—it is subtitled “A Memoir,” so no secret there. The book goes into great detail about the negotiations, and the positions taken by the different parties, including the differences in approach during the two Iranian presidencies that he covers. The manuscript is heavily footnoted—although sometimes important sections, such as when he quotes a retired US politician on US security objectives in the Middle East, are left unreferences—and overall it reads like a historical reference book that contains detailed analysis of the period of negotiations that he experienced. But what is troubling about the book is that Mousavian takes the well-known Iranian assumptions and positions as facts, and in this sense he presents a biased and one-sided analysis that cannot be regarded as a reliable or authoritative account of the negotiations. Mousavian's most problematic assumption, which colors the entire analysis, is that Iran has no intention of acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.

TOWARD A CONCLUSION: NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION EFFORTS—WHAT CAN WE EXPECT?

When considering the broader message for nuclear non-proliferation efforts—especially the challenge of confronting a determined proliferator that is attempting to achieve nuclear weapons while abusing the “cover” of the NPT—there is something troubling in Pollack’s analysis. He notes that only an American military campaign constitutes a “final option,” a “true alternative to containment.” The other options he raises risk failure, he says, and he actually fears that none of the options—including an American military campaign—will succeed at an acceptable cost, which explains why he prefers a strategy of containment. Still, he feels that “a revised Dual Track approach and some aspects of regime change” are worth trying “*regardless of their likelihood*” (emphasis in original). Yet it is the time that has been wasted and lost during negotiations—that Pollack assessed to be failing—that has made the military option (the only option that Pollack views as equal to containment in its “finality”) seem as dangerous and unrealistic as it does today, leaving only the option of acquiescence to an eventual Iranian nuclear weapon.

Perhaps the intellectual energies of both Kroenig and Pollack should have focused first and foremost on analyzing the negotiations and what should have been done differently. (This of course is what Mousavian has done, but for him it’s all about the unwarranted Western pressure on Iran.) Because in theory, a negotiated settlement that reflects an altered Iranian stance vis-à-vis a military nuclear capability would be the true “final option.” Tough negotiations, accompanied by massive pressure, could have convinced Iran that this was the better option, as Syria was “convinced” to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in September 2013. If credible and determined threats of military force had accompanied attempts to negotiate *from an early stage*, and if there had been firm and steady pressure to expose Iran’s “smoking-gun” work on a military nuclear capability in the context of the bargaining process, negotiations could have been more successful.

On the other hand, if, as Pollack claims, the only options that are “final” are a military campaign or containment of a nuclear Iran, then surely time should *not* have been wasted on risky negotiations, and military force should have been used against this very dangerous proliferator at a very initial stage, when it would have been a much simpler campaign. It seems that this was exactly the thinking behind Israel’s decision in September 2007 to strike the North Korean-style nuclear facility being constructed in Syria. Israel knew by 2007 that if the information it had regarding this facility had been turned over to the IAEA, there was a huge risk that Syria would become another Iran,

and Israel was not going to take that risk. In other words, unless there is clear and unified international determination to negotiate in a tough manner—taking into account that a more advanced proliferator will only back down if it feels it has no choice—early use of military force is the only answer if the world is indeed determined to uphold the NPT and stop the spread of nuclear weapons to dangerous regimes. This is a sobering but perhaps very realistic message for nuclear non-proliferation efforts, and for anyone who takes the threat of nuclear weapons in the hands of dangerous, aggressive, and offensively oriented regimes like Iran very seriously. The repercussions of a containment strategy that resolves itself to a nuclear Iran are simply too serious for the Middle East, for the NPT and non-proliferation down the road, and for global security in the broadest sense.