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After Lausanne: Improving the United States Position in the Negotiations with Iran

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One day after the framework of understandings formulated in Lausanne between the P5+1 and Iran on the future of the Iranian nuclear program was made public, the *Washington Post* and ABC published a public opinion poll. The results indicated widespread public support for an agreement as well as widespread public understanding that the agreement will not be able to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The poll confirms a worrisome trend discernible already during the extended nuclear negotiations between the world powers, headed by the United States, and Iran: an erosion in the US position compared to the Iranian position. Accordingly, it is imperative to use the next few months – the period allotted for formulating a final agreement – to strengthen the US stance so that the United States, together with its allies, will be able to reduce the future risk inherent in Iran's nuclear program.

In July 2012, an unprecedented set of international sanctions against Iran went into effect following concerted efforts by the US administration designed to force Tehran to choose between preservation of the regime and preservation of the nuclear program. US allies in Europe and the Security Council joined the move; the British Foreign Minister even stressed that “unless they [the Iranians] change course, the pressure will only increase.” On the assumption that the Tehran regime – considered relatively pragmatic – would choose regime survival over the nuclear program, the campaign sought to extract Iranian concessions that would roll back the nuclear program. Another assumption was that if it proved impossible to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear capabilities, especially those that can be used for military purposes, it would be legitimate to declare that the diplomatic option had been exhausted and turn to other alternatives designed to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

Although this strategy brought Iran to the negotiating table, it was abandoned by the administration. Instead of Tehran being forced to choose between a deal with the world powers and an increase in economic pressure that would undermine its rule, now it is the White House that must choose between a deal and two other unpalatable options, as

presented by President Obama in recent addresses: a military strike leading to a regional war or acceptance of an Iranian nuclear bomb. According to this equation, the US leverage is limited, because the administration does not have a better alternative than concluding the negotiations with an agreement.

The joint declaration on the continued negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 on the basis of shared understandings and a framework of principles made public by the White House is a clear indication of erosion in the US position. While the US document includes some possible important achievements that may be celebrated if included in a final deal (mostly importantly the rollback of the Iranian nuclear program, significant restrictions on the program's different development tracks, and the establishment of verification mechanisms to monitor Iran's compliance with these restrictions), at this point these achievements are merely theoretical. Maintaining these achievements will be difficult given the lack of agreement on the core issues, as reflected by Iran's own statements on the understandings achieved. Even if Iran accepts the American principles, "the devil is in the details" and the details have yet to be agreed on.

Nonetheless, even if the US document is fully implemented, the Iranian nuclear bomb threat will not be lifted. A deal consistent with the principles made public by the White House will ensure that Iran is one year away from nuclear arms. This is very little time, during which the international community would have to discover an Iranian attempt to cross the nuclear threshold and formulate an appropriate response. It is almost certain that if Iran does not abide by the agreement and breaks out to the bomb, all International Atomic Energy Agency supervisors will be expelled from the country. Iran will be left with 6,000 centrifuges that may continue to enrich uranium in Natanz and the well-protected facility in Qom. The centrifuges that will in the meantime have stood idle – in Iran, under IAEA monitoring – will once again be activated. Iran will presumably operate all its centrifuges and the enriched material will be under its control, even if according to the agreement they are not supposed to be in use. Because the restoration of international sanctions and their enforcement will be complex, there is strong concern that the international community will not have enough time to respond to an Iranian violation of the agreement. It is therefore critical to incorporate a clearly defined, stringent enforcement mechanism into the final agreement that will provide Iran with incentives to uphold the agreement. Such a mechanism is currently absent from the US document of principles. Moreover, the framework allows Iran significantly to reduce the breakout time after 13 years, as also made clear by President Obama.

For all of these reasons, even a scenario in which the document of principles made public by the US administration is fully implemented is not likely to achieve President Obama's goal, i.e., "to cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon" (though in any event the likelihood of this scenario is not high, given the gap in stances

between the negotiating partners and Iran). Rather, the agreement would in fact serve as the first step in a much longer term and broader strategy designed to deter Iran from violating the agreement by means of capabilities in identifying and stopping Iranian violations. Therefore, the announcement on the understandings achieved and the continuation of the negotiations should be seen as an opportunity for changing the dynamic of the negotiations and improving the US stance vis-à-vis the Iranian position.

The improvement should be manifested on three levels. One, it is necessary to create an alternative to the agreement with Iran that will protect US interests and broaden the range of existing options. This would strengthen the US position in the negotiations in case Iran rejects the concessions required of it. The United States is the strongest political, economic, and military power in the world. It can therefore make time play in its favor so that Iran is the one pushing for an agreement. Two, the United States and its allies in the Middle East must join forces when it comes to intelligence gathering so as to identify Iranian violations during and after the negotiations. Cooperation in so complex an intelligence challenge requires significant resources, including time. It is therefore necessary to put it in place as soon as possible. Three, the United States must formulate corollary agreements with its regional allies, including Israel. This should include agreement on the parameters for the final deal, a joint intelligence campaign to monitor Iran's covert facilities, and a coordinated response should the talks collapse or should there be a future Iranian violation of a signed deal. These agreements are necessary as an expression of a united front against Iran during the negotiations and in order to prevent unilateral steps on the part of nations that are not parties to the talks but are threatened by Iran. Such steps, as a response to the regional challenge posed by Iran, are liable to lead to regional escalation or even to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

