

## 10 Questions for President Obama About Iran

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Articles & Testimony

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**The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg -- who frequently interviews President Obama on Middle East issues -- poses Robert Satloff's ten provocative questions on the Iran deal and promises to get answers.**

**R**ead this article on the Atlantic website.  
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/obama-nuclear-iran-robert-satloff/402478/>)

It appears likely, as of this writing, that Barack Obama will be victorious in his fight to implement the Iran nuclear deal negotiated by his secretary of state, John Kerry. Republicans in Congress don't appear to have the votes necessary to void the agreement, and Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign to subvert Obama may be remembered as one of the more counterproductive and shortsighted acts of an Israeli prime minister since the rebirth of the Jewish state 67 years ago.

Things could change, of course, and the Iranian regime, which is populated in good part by extremists, fundamentalist theocrats, and supporters of terrorism, could do something monumentally stupid in the coming weeks that could force on-the-fence Democrats to side with their Republican adversaries (remember the Cafe Milano fiasco, anyone?). But, generally speaking, the Obama administration and its European allies seem to have a clearer path to implementation than they had at the beginning of the month.

Which is a good thing. I remain in the camp of people who are not happy that Iran will be strengthened economically by this deal -- much of this money will be flowing to such horrifying Iranian clients as Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon -- but who also believe that there is no reasonable alternative to the deal, and believe, by the way, that Israel, among other parties, might actually benefit from it.

I've read various arguments advancing the line that the U.S. could, in the absence of an agreement, unilaterally prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold without going to war, and there is some merit to these arguments. I don't like the surety of those who argue that congressional rejection of the deal axiomatically means armed conflict between the U.S. and Iran (and I certainly don't like the malevolent attempt by some to label Jewish critics of the deal as traitors), but ultimately these formulas aren't convincing. The deal places real constraints -- not perfect constraints, but meaningful constraints nonetheless -- on Iran's nuclear ambitions. No deal means no constraints. I find myself more or less in agreement with Brent Scowcroft, the former U.S. national security adviser, who wrote in the *Washington Post* last week that if the U.S. walks away from the deal, it walks away alone:

"The world's leading powers worked together effectively because of U.S. leadership. To turn our back on this accomplishment would be an abdication of the United States' unique role and responsibility, incurring justified

dismay among our allies and friends. We would lose all leverage over Iran's nuclear activities. The international sanctions regime would dissolve. And no member of Congress should be under the illusion that another U.S. invasion of the Middle East would be helpful."

The partisan polarization of this issue, and Netanyahu's self-destructive all-or-nothing approach, have made it more difficult to discuss matters that actually need discussing right now: ways in which the deal could be strengthened, and ways in which Iran's regional ambitions -- non-nuclear but still nefarious ambitions -- could be checked.

One person who has been talking about the need to strengthen the deal, and who has been raising questions about the deal's potential unintended consequences, is Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. It's been my impression that Satloff is more skeptical of the deal than I am, though like his Institute colleague Dennis Ross, the former U.S. Middle East peace negotiator (and Obama administration Iran aide), he has not said whether he will support the deal or not. In fact, he argues that the binary choice -- for or against the deal -- is too restrictive when there is still time for the administration to make improvements to the deal without opening it up for renegotiation. It is not yet too late, he contends, to make the agreement stronger -- and that, he suggests, is what the Obama administration should be doing. (It is also what Netanyahu ought to be doing, though there doesn't seem to be any hope that this will happen, because Netanyahu is currently living in an alternate universe where Israeli prime ministers are more powerful than American presidents.) These improvements, Satloff told me, stem from his analysis of flaws in the deal -- both in the text itself and in the thinking that brought the deal into existence.

During the course of a lengthy email exchange with me over the past several days, Satloff generated a list of 10 questions he would like to ask President Obama about the deal. I decided, because I am both fair and balanced, that I would reproduce these questions here in full, without my commentary. I'll follow up this post with another one in which I try to elicit answers to his questions, if not from administration officials, then from people who are more ardently pro-deal than myself. Here are Satloff's questions to the president:

1. You have argued that the Iran deal enhances Israel's security and those of our Arab Gulf allies. At the same time, your administration has offered the Gulf states a huge security package by way of compensation and you have expressed frustration that the government of Israel has not yet entered into discussions with you to discuss ways to bolster its security. But isn't this a paradox? If the Iran deal bolsters their security, shouldn't their security needs be going down, not up?
2. It is surely legitimate for you to argue that the Iran deal enhances U.S. security, but it certainly seems odd for you to claim to understand Israel's security needs more than its democratically elected leaders. Are there other democracies whose leaders you believe don't recognize their own best security interests or is Israel unique in this regard?
3. Constructive, respected, well-informed observers, like your former National Security Council Iran policy advisor Dennis Ross, have urged you to propose transferring to Israel the "mountain-busting" Massive Ordnance Penetrator as a way to boost Israel's independent deterrence against Iran. But you have not done so. Instead, in your letter to Congressman Jerrold Nadler, you highlighted your administration's plan to send Israel a much less capable weapon. Why are you reluctant to send Israel the best item we have in our inventory to address this profound threat?
4. You have said that the Iran nuclear agreement provides a peaceful, diplomatic resolution to the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Would you agree, therefore, that the pursuit of an independent nuclear option by another Middle East country -- say, Saudi Arabia -- would be clear evidence that the Iran deal had failed?
5. In your letter to Congressman Nadler, you refused to spell out the penalties Iran would suffer for violations of the agreement, saying that "telegraphing in advance to Iran the expected response for any potential infractions would be

counterproductive, potentially lessening the deterrent effect." On the surface, this is difficult to understand -- after all, as a constitutional law professor, you can appreciate that having clarity in terms of penalties for lawbreaking is a basic element of our legal system. If you aren't willing to publicly spell out this approach to penalties, can you guarantee that the United States and its European partners have already agreed, in writing, on precisely what actions they will collectively take in response to different types of infractions? Will you share these details with at least the leaders of the relevant committees in Congress? Or is the real reason you aren't willing to "telegraph" these penalties in advance is because we and the Europeans can't agree on them?

6. In your letter to Congressman Nadler, you also said you "reserved the right to deploy new sanctions to address continuing concerns." Can you spell out what sort of new sanctions you have in mind? Specifically, wouldn't it make sense for you to ask Congress to articulate new sanctions now that would come into effect if our intelligence agencies reported that Iran was using its sanctions-relief windfall to transfer large sums (or expensive weapons systems) to its allies and terrorist proxies?

7. You have argued that the global sanctions regime falls apart if Congress rejects the Iran deal. But the key variable here is not Europe, China or some other foreign country -- it's the United States. Specifically, the sanctions regime only collapses if the U.S. stops enforcing the sanctions with the same vigor it has enforced them with in recent years, and instead goes back to the policy of the Clinton and Bush administrations, which refused to enforce the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) despite overwhelming votes for that law in Congress. In the event of a "no" vote, can you promise that your administration will expend the same effort and resources to enforce U.S. sanctions laws against Iran as has been the case the last few years? And if that's the case, what's your explanation for how or why sanctions will collapse?

8. The supreme leader clearly wants the benefits of the deal -- both in terms of sanctions relief and the international validation it brings for Iran's nuclear program. Yet you seem to bend over backwards to be wary of saying things that might upset him. (Given the supreme leader's continued hostility toward America, this is a characteristic that he doesn't seem to share.) Specifically, in your letter to Congressman Nadler, why did you resort once again to the "all options are on the table" formulation in the event Iran dashes toward a bomb? Since a "dash" implies Iran would be hell-bent toward achieving its goal, why not state bluntly that we would use force to stop them? If they are dashing, haven't they already violated the core commitment in the Iran agreement not to pursue a weapon? If they are dashing, the threat of renewed sanctions surely isn't an effective deterrent. Wouldn't candor produce more deterrence than subtlety?

9. In your American University speech, you said the Iran agreement produced a "permanent" solution to the threat of the Iranian nuclear bomb. But just a few months ago, you told an NPR interviewer that Iran's breakout time toward a bomb "would have shrunk almost down to zero" when restrictions on centrifuges and enrichment expire after 10-15 years. Can both statements really be true?

10. In your final debate with Mitt Romney in October 2012, just before you came before American voters for the final time, moderator Bob Schieffer asked you specifically what sort of Iran deal you would accept. Your response was: "The deal we'll accept is that they end their nuclear program." Notwithstanding the significant achievements of the Iran agreement, it clearly falls short of "ending their nuclear program." Moreover, you and your spokespeople regularly disparage as warmongers those who advocate what you once called for. Why did your own position in 2012 become warmongering by 2015? ❖

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