

Nuclear Deal or More? A Survey of Official U.S. Statements on the Iran Agreement

by [Patrick Schmidt \(/experts/patrick-schmidt\)](#)

Aug 4, 2015

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Brief Analysis

While the administration's statements are largely framed as realistic optimism about containing the nuclear program, some allies may worry that its comments on improving U.S.-Iranian relations are too aspirational.

Many U.S. allies are interested in discussing the broader, longer-term impact of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran. As part of this effort, they will be listening closely to what U.S. officials say in order to determine whether the Obama administration's Iran policy is truly limited to engagement on the nuclear file. Below are relevant statements by President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Secretary of State Kerry, culled from speeches and other public remarks made before and after the agreement was finalized last month.

NUCLEAR DEAL AS A LIMITED TRANSACTION...

Biden, 67th Annual Israeli Independence Day Celebration, April 23, 2015

"This isn't a grand bargain between the United States and Iran. It's a nuclear bargain between Britain, France, Russia, China, Germany, the EU, America, and Iran."

Biden, The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium, April 30, 2015

"Finally, there is the myth that a nuclear deal between the United States and Iran enables Iran to gain dominance inside the Middle East. Folks, this isn't a grand bargain between America and Iran that addresses all the differences between us. This is a nuclear bargain between Britain, France, Russia, China, Germany, the EU, America, and Iran - - one that reduces the risk of nuclear war and makes the region and the world safer as a result. It's not a bet on Iran changing its stripes. All of you know that Iran is not a monolith. There is significant debate within Iran about its future. Some want to dominate the region via militant proxies. Others want more normal relations with the outside world. Many of those helped elect Rouhani. But you see, that debate is being fought out inside Iran. It's not the

premise upon which this deal is made. This deal is solid, worthwhile, and enforceable regardless of the outcome of that internal debate in Iran."

Obama, interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 13, 2015

"Even as we've pursued a nuclear deal with Iran, the United States has remained vigilant against Iran's other reckless behavior. We've maintained our robust military presence in the region and continued to help the GCC states build their capacity to deter and defend against all forms of external aggression. We've continued to fully enforce sanctions against Iran for its support of terrorism and its ballistic missile program -- and we will enforce these sanctions going forward, even if we reach a nuclear deal with Iran."

Kerry, press briefing, July 14, 2015

"First, what we are announcing today is an agreement addressing the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program -- period -- just the nuclear program. And anybody who knows the conduct of international affairs knows that it is better to deal with a country if you have problems with it if they don't have a nuclear weapon. As such, a number of U.S. sanctions will remain in place, including those related to terrorism, human rights, and ballistic missiles. In addition, the United States will continue our efforts to address concerns about Iran's actions in the region, including by...providing key support to our partners and our allies and by making sure we are vigilant in pushing back against destabilizing activities."

Obama, interview with Thomas Friedman, July 14, 2015

"We're not measuring this deal by whether we are solving every problem that can be traced back to Iran, whether we are eliminating all their nefarious activities around the globe. We are measuring this deal -- and that was the original premise of this conversation, including by Prime Minister Netanyahu -- [by whether] Iran could not get a nuclear weapon....

"[I]ncreasingly, the critics are shifting off the nuclear issue, and they're moving into, 'Well, even if the nuclear issue is dealt with, they're still going to be sponsoring terrorism, and they're going to get this sanctions relief. And so they're going to have more money to engage in these bad activities.' That is a possibility, and we are going to have to systematically guard against that and work with our allies -- the Gulf countries, Israel -- to stop the work that they are doing outside of the nuclear program. But the central premise here is that if they got a nuclear weapon, that would be different, and on that score, we have achieved our objective."

Kerry, interview with the BBC, July 14, 2015

"We have no idea what the future holds with respect to any kind of cooperation, and that is not the purpose of this agreement. This agreement is a nuclear agreement. We know that whatever activities Iran is engaged in today would be far more empowered and more of a challenge to the global community if they had a nuclear weapon."

Obama, weekly address, July 18, 2015

"Does this deal resolve all of the threats Iran poses to its neighbors and the world? No. Does it do more than anyone has done before to make sure Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon? Yes. And that was our top priority from the start."

Kerry, Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, July 23, 2015

"This plan was designed to address the nuclear issue, the nuclear issue alone, because we knew that if we got caught up with all the other issues, we'd never get where we needed to [be] to stop the nuclear program. It would be rope-a-dope, staying there forever, negotiating one aspect or another."

Kerry, House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, July 28, 2015

"There is no presumption in here about what Iran will or won't do. There is one objective: make sure they can't get a nuclear weapon. On the backside of that, we have a very robust initiative that will push back against Iran's other

activities."

...BUT THE DOOR IS OPEN

Obama, White House speech, November 23, 2013

"If Iran seizes this opportunity, the Iranian people will benefit from rejoining the international community, and we can begin to chip away at the mistrust between our two nations. This would provide Iran with a dignified path to forge a new beginning with the wider world based on mutual respect. If, on the other hand, Iran refuses, it will face growing pressure and isolation."

Obama, interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, March 2, 2014

"Let's assume that Iran is not going to change. It's a theocracy. It's anti-Semitic. It is anti-Sunni. And the new leaders are just for show. Let's assume all that. If we can ensure that they don't have nuclear weapons, then we have at least prevented them from bullying their neighbors or, heaven forbid, using those weapons, and the other misbehavior they're engaging in is manageable. If, on the other hand, they are capable of changing; if, in fact, as a consequence of a deal on their nuclear program those voices and trends inside of Iran are strengthened, and their economy becomes more integrated into the international community, and there's more travel and greater openness, even if that takes a decade or fifteen years or twenty years, then that's very much an outcome we should desire."

Obama, interview with NPR, December 29, 2014

"If Iran recognizes that it is in its own interests, having already said that they're actually not interested in developing a nuclear weapon, to go ahead and prove that to the world, so that over time as it's verified, sanctions are removed, their economy begins to grow, they're reintegrated into the international community -- if we can take that big first step, then my hope would be that [it] would serve as the basis for us trying to improve relations over time..."

"But in order for us to, I think, open that aperture with respect to Iran, we have to get this nuclear issue resolved -- and there's a chance to do it, and the question's going to be whether or not Iran is willing to seize it. I think there are elements inside of Iran that recognize the opportunity and want to take it; I think there [are] some hardliners inside of Iran that are threatened by a resolution of this because they are so invested politically and emotionally in being anti-American or anti-Western that it's frightening for them to open themselves up to the world in this way..."

"They have a path to break through that isolation and they should seize it. Because if they do, there's incredible talent and resources and sophistication...inside of Iran, and it would be a very successful regional power that was also abiding by international norms and international rules, and that would be good for everybody. That would be good for the United States, that would be good for the region, and most of all, it would be good for the Iranian people."

Obama, Nowruz message, March 19, 2015

"[I]f Iran's leaders can agree to a reasonable deal, it can lead to a better path -- the path of greater opportunities for the Iranian people. More trade and ties with the world. More foreign investment and jobs, including for young Iranians. More cultural exchanges and chances for Iranian students to travel abroad. More partnerships in areas like science and technology and innovation. In other words, a nuclear deal now can help open the door to a brighter future for you -- the Iranian people, who, as heirs to a great civilization, have so much to give to the world."

Obama, interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 13, 2015

"When it comes to Iran's future, I cannot predict Iran's internal dynamics. Within Iran, there are leaders and groups that for decades have defined themselves in opposition to both the United States and our regional partners. I'm not counting on any nuclear deal to change that. That said, it's also possible that if we can successfully address the nuclear question and Iran begins to receive relief from some nuclear sanctions, it could lead to more investments in the Iranian economy and more opportunity for the Iranian people, which could strengthen the hands of more moderate leaders in Iran. More Iranians could see that constructive engagement -- not confrontation -- with the

international community is the better path. There are two paths available to Iran. One is continued confrontation; the better one is a more constructive approach to the region that would allow Iran to become more integrated with the global community. But even if the political dynamics in Iran do not change, a nuclear deal becomes even more necessary because it prevents a regime that is hostile to us from obtaining a nuclear weapon."

Kerry, interview with the BBC, July 14, 2015

"Now, in the future, if Iran does change -- they've said they're willing to...I'm not betting, but we will certainly put to the test as we go forward what their activities are and what their engagement is that they're willing to shift in the region."

Obama, interview with Thomas Friedman, July 14, 2015

"[T]he truth of the matter is that Iran will be and should be a regional power. They are a big country and a sophisticated country in the region. They don't need to invite the hostility and the opposition of their neighbors by their behavior. It's not necessary for them to be great to denigrate Israel or threaten Israel or engage in Holocaust denial or anti-Semitic activity. Now that's what I would say to the Iranian people. Whether the Iranian people have sufficient influence to fundamentally shift how their leaders think about these issues, time will tell....

"I think that we've also learned that there are different voices and different forces inside of Iran, and that those may not be consistent with our values. The so-called moderate in Iran is not going to be suddenly somebody who we feel reflects universal issues like human rights, but there are better or worse approaches that Iran can take relative to our interests and the interests of our allies, and we should see where we can encourage that better approach."

Kerry, Council on Foreign Relations Q&A, July 24, 2015

"I am not betting [that Iran will change significantly over the course of the agreement]. I'm suggesting that over fifteen years, things happen in countries...I don't know what happens in fifteen years, except that I know a lot of things change in countries. And nobody could imagine what would happen with China when Nixon went...[P]eople objected to Reagan negotiating with the 'evil empire.' I mean, if you don't do these things, folks, you can't create change, you don't test possibilities. What I do know is this: if we turn our backs on this deal, folks, we're sending one hell of a message to the hardliners in Iran. And they'll feel good...[W]ho knows what happens in an election, but Rouhani and Zarif, who have staked themselves on the potential of being able to negotiate with the West and being able to arrive at a conclusion, will be in serious trouble in my judgment."

CONCLUSION

While statements by President Obama and other administration officials are largely framed as realistic optimism for a transactional arrangement to contain Iran's nuclear program, their comments on the potential for improved relations with Tehran might appear aspirational to allies in a way that negates other assurances. If these allies come to believe that Washington is banking on positive developments in the Iranian political arena, their concerns about unwelcome changes in U.S. policy could increase.

Patrick Schmidt is a research assistant at The Washington Institute. ❖

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