

What If a Nuclear Deal Is Reached—and Iran’s Behavior Doesn’t Change?

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As another negotiating deadline comes and goes, U.S. allies in the Middle East appear less concerned with the particulars of a possible accord than the particulars of U.S. policy toward Iran after a deal.

The Obama administration believes that Iran’s behavior in the region will improve after a nuclear agreement is reached. Yet there are good reasons to suspect this will not be the case. Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, may feel compelled in the wake of a compromise to reassert his regime’s anti-Americanism, both because it is one of the Islamic Republic’s key pillars and out of worry that a deal with the U.S. could lead to a broader opening to the West. Any deal would be seen in Iran as a political victory for President Hasan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, both relative pragmatists. This could prompt the supreme leader—who has been known to try to balance the political power of his regime’s contentious factions—to seek to bolster hard-liners in a deal’s wake.

Iran’s behavior will be driven not only by the nuclear deal but also by events in the Middle East and South Asia. Using proxies and subversion to project its power and drive adversaries to distraction, Tehran has become deeply enmeshed in regional conflicts, many of which—such as in Iraq and Syria—appear to be worsening rather than abating. Those deepening conflicts are due in no small part to Iran’s involvement, which feeds the same sectarian tensions stoked by Islamic State and raises alarms among nearby rivals. Iran will have motivation to intensify its involvement in regional conflagrations and, thanks to the funds expected to flow in the wake of a nuclear accord, the financial wherewithal to do so.

If an accord is reached, in addition to Iran’s behavior in the region Washington will also need to deal with those elements of Iran’s nuclear program not specifically addressed by an accord. This is expected to include Iran’s ballistic missile program, which is dual-use but has clear application to the development of a nuclear weapon. After the agreed framework was concluded between the U.S. and North Korea in 1994, Pyongyang’s ballistic missile activities became a major point of contention with the Clinton administration.

There is reason to worry that this pattern will be repeated: Tehran possesses the largest, most sophisticated ballistic missile arsenal in the region. It has sought to extend the range and capability of its missiles. It has shared missiles

with others, including terrorist groups. And despite refusing to moderate its missile program, Iran is demanding that missile and conventional-arms sanctions against it be dropped as part of a nuclear deal.

According to the parameters released April 2 by the White House, an agreement would limit many of Iran's nuclear activities only temporarily. The next U.S. administration will need to consider how to deal with Iranian violations of its covenants as well as how to respond if Tehran steps up its nuclear activities after any constraints expire. The time frame under discussion means that this will be an important issue for the next two presidential terms, whoever wins the White House in 2016 and 2020. For example, Iran's commitment to refrain from enriching uranium to more than 3.67% will last a maximum of 15 years. Surely the U.S. and its allies would not stand idle were Iran to enrich to 90%—the level considered weapons-grade—or to other threshold capabilities. Nor is the U.S. likely to be indifferent toward a significant expansion of Iran's enriched-uranium stockpile or nuclear infrastructure even after limits on them expire.

Some of these eventualities loom in the near term; others may yet be a decade off. But for each, U.S. officials must be prepared with a response—and seek to deter it from occurring in the first place. An additional challenge: taking care not to allow the partisanship and bitterness that have come to pervade the debate over the nuclear negotiations to spill over into their efforts. The Obama administration and its successor, Democrat or Republican, will benefit from congressional cooperation and that of U.S. allies in the Middle East as it devises post-deal policy toward Iran. If the recent rancor derails this cooperation, Iran's gains from a nuclear agreement will only be magnified.

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