

Implications of the Iran Nuclear Agreement for U.S. Policy in the Middle East

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Any agreement should be judged not only by its verifiable nuclear restraints, but also by the credibility of U.S. readiness to contain the regime's asymmetrical military, ideological, religious, economic, and diplomatic moves in the region.

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, it is an honor to be here today.

The question of Iran, in the related contexts of a possible nuclear agreement with it, and its worrisome role in the region, is one of the most important in Middle East affairs. But it is not the only one, as the region is shaken by crises, threats to stability, popular unrest, and ideological and theological turbulence not seen since the end of the Ottoman Empire. All these developments are linked. Separately, and even more together, they threaten American core national interests laid out by President Obama in September 2013: supporting our allies and partners, protecting the free flow of hydrocarbons to the world's economy, and combating terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The action of the U.S. Congress in passing the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act is an important step in coping with these threats, ensuring that the American people will have a say in developments affecting their security.

As we do not know at this point what an eventual nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran will look like, it is not possible to make any detailed judgment on the final package. If we arrive at that point, an agreement will have to be judged based on its specifics on issues such as verification, disposition of unauthorized enriched uranium, and sanctions status, to ensure a long-term check on Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions and possible covert programs. Furthermore, in reviewing any nuclear agreement with Iran, I urge the U.S. Congress to consider the following:

First, the agreement cannot be considered outside the context of Iran's record of destabilization in the region. Two Middle Eastern states either have acknowledged, or are widely believed to have, possession of nuclear weapons. But the region's leaders do not lose sleep over these weapons, nor does the UN Security Council pass multiple Chapter VII resolutions about them, as with Iran. The reason is that Iran's behavior in the region is profoundly troubling to many states. Either an Iranian nuclear weapons capability, or an Iran politically empowered by an agreement that stops it just short of such a capability, would pose extraordinary new threats to a region already under stress, and undermine the above U.S. vital interests.

Second, in reviewing Iran's behavior in the region, we all must bear in mind that Iran is not a status quo power. As my two Washington Institute colleagues, Mehdi Khalaji and Soner Cagaptay, and I wrote in the *New York Times* April 26 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-wont-give-up-on-its-revolution>), "Iran is a revolutionary power with hegemonic aspirations. In other words, it is a country seeking to assert its dominance in the region and it will not play by the rules...Iran, however, has brazenly defied (the) international order and continues to expand its reach." In short, we concluded, "Do not expect Iran to compromise its principles any time soon." Any decision on the Iran nuclear deal must bear this sobering fact in mind, and must not read Iranian willingness to sign an agreement as a change of heart about its ultimate hegemonic goals.

Third, in particular given Iran's role in the region, no nuclear agreement is better than one that might push back by some months Iran's ability to break out to a weapons capability, if such an agreement were to undercut the current huge international coalition against an Iranian nuclear weapon, enhance Iran's prestige, and undermine the credibility of U.S. containment both of Iran's nuclear ambitions and its wider regional agenda.

Fourth, the administration's argument that there is no alternative to approving an agreement is incorrect, and tantamount to advocating an "any agreement is better than none" position. It is not beyond the skill of U.S. diplomacy, were Iran to walk away from the deal struck in early April, to persuade other countries to keep the current oil and other international sanctions in place. Additional international sanctions would however be difficult to impose in all but an egregious case of Iranian provocation, but retaining the current sanctions would be a heavy price for Iran to bear. If the United States did not, but Iran did, accept a final deal similar to that laid out in the White House April 2 paper, increasing or even maintaining the current international oil import sanctions under the NDAA and the EU's separate boycott would be most difficult. That does not rule out the U.S. opting out of an agreement, but in that case the tools to pressure Iran would be more limited. The U.S. would still have its direct sanctions, UN sanctions (as lifting them is subject to U.S. veto), banking and commercial pressure points, and perhaps some residual third country limits on importing of Iranian oil. Between these two variants -- Iran refusing anything like the April outline, or the U.S. not accepting it -- there are various scenarios, each with more or less difficulty in maintaining sanctions and other international pressure on Iran.

With or without the support of the international community, however, if there is no agreement, then the main restraint on Iranian breakout would have to be U.S. and partner intelligence collection and U.S. readiness, understood by all, to use force if Iran approaches a nuclear weapons capability. While that is stated U.S. policy, albeit expressed indirectly such as "preserve all options," the president has effectively undercut this policy by repeated warnings about inevitable "war" if no agreement is reached. Without an agreement a military confrontation would be more likely, but not inevitable. Of course, a military confrontation with Iran could be costly and risk escalation, but, absent spectacularly bad U.S. decisions, it is unlikely to produce either a U.S. defeat or a "war" in the sense normally used in American political debate -- endless, bloody ground combat by hundreds of thousands of troops as in Iraq or Vietnam. Based on my experience I know how uncertain any resort to force is, but all our security interests are ultimately anchored on willingness to use force, and success doing so.

Fifth, even with an agreement, the ultimate restraint on Iran reaching a nuclear weapons capability resides as well in

the capability and intent of the U.S. to stop Iran militarily from reaching a nuclear weapons capability. Thus, the U.S. Congress could usefully support such a deterrence policy by passing in one or another form an advance authorization for the use of military force against an Iran in breakout. The administration for its part should make clear what its redline is for military action against Iran -- what Iranian steps or situation would be considered a "threshold" requiring the U.S. to act on its "prevent a nuclear-armed Iran" policy. Clarity on congressional and thus American public support for military action, and clarity on when that action would be taken, would go far to refurbish American deterrence and make it less likely that we would be tested.

Sixth, in the end, everything related to Iran revolves around its role in the region. If a nuclear accord leads to a new Iran, willing to accept the regional status quo, that is all for the better, however unlikely. But until such an outcome is clear, the U.S. should not bet on it occurring, and in particular should not pull its punches in restraining Iran out of concern that a U.S. response could stymie an alleged budding moderation. Those who hope for such an Iranian change of heart should consider Iran's threat to Israel via weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas, its actions in Iraq, and the attempt by senior Iranian intelligence officials to bomb the Cafe Milano here in Washington.

While the president's Camp David initiative sought to allay the fears of regional states that an Iran "empowered" by the prestige of a nuclear agreement (and eventually over one hundred billion dollars of returned frozen funds) would continue to make mischief, skepticism is called for. The administration's focus at Camp David and in most exchanges with our regional allies is centered on our commitment to their conventional defense, and our assistance to their military forces. But they fear far less an outright Iranian invasion than Iranian infiltration of the weak areas in the Arab world, promoting instability and stresses on the Sunni nation states of the region in a religious, political, and psychological sense. As we wrote in our *New York Times* piece, Iran "uses an assortment of terrorism, proliferation, military proxies, and occasionally old-fashioned diplomacy to further its dominance."

What these states need is a commitment by the U.S., backed at this point by action, that Washington will use all the tools in its arsenal, including military, to combat and drive back illicit Iranian efforts to infiltrate and undermine Arab states throughout the region. This includes pushing back on Iran's actions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Gaza. Supporting the Saudi-led coalition operating in Yemen, threatening to inspect Iranian ships allegedly bringing humanitarian supplies to Yemen, agreeing with the Turks on preliminary plans to train 5,000 Syrian personnel in Turkey, and other recent steps are examples of what the U.S. must be ready to routinely do to regain regional partners' confidence.

In sum, any agreement should be judged not only on the basis of its verifiable, real restraints on Iran, but also by the context within which the agreement would operate: readiness to back it by far more explicit and credible readiness to use force to stop a breakout, and a far more active U.S. program to contain Iran's asymmetrical military, ideological, religious, economic, and diplomatic moves to expand its influence in the region.

[Watch video of the full hearing on the Foreign Relations Committee website.](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/implications-of-the-iran-nuclear-agreement-for-us-policy-in-the-middle-east)

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Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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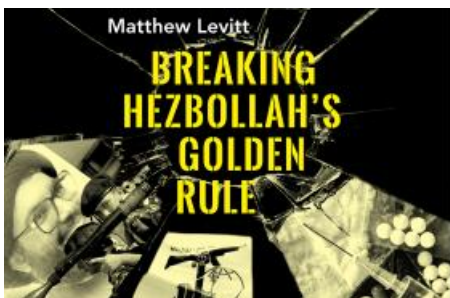
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