

The Camp David Conference Under the Shadow of Cuba

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

May 5, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/mwtmr-kamb-dyfyd-fy-zlal-kwba\)](/ar/policy-analysis/mwtmr-kamb-dyfyd-fy-zlal-kwba)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Brief Analysis

To ensure a successful summit with GCC leaders, the administration needs to make clear that its one-sided, 'transformational' approach to Cuba will not be repeated with the Iran nuclear deal.

Upon announcing the framework Iran nuclear agreement last month, President Obama also invited the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to meet with him at Camp David on May 13. In doing so, the administration correctly read their deep concern that a nuclear deal will "unleash" Iran by granting tacit U.S. accommodation of its quest for regional hegemony.

Reassuring GCC leaders about their growing security threats will not be easy, however. Washington can and should provide numerous concrete measures, such as security commitments, weapons transfers, military deployments, and perhaps even new operations in hotspots such as Syria. But GCC leaders are likely looking for more than visible U.S. steps -- they also want a pledge that the nuclear agreement will not draw America away from its traditional containment of Iran's hegemonic ambitions. Absent this commitment, other measures will not be worth much, since they are relatively easy to give and do not guarantee underlying policy in the long term. Although such a pledge may yet materialize at Camp David, the ambiguity of official U.S. statements thus far raises concern that the administration might instead adopt the one-sided approach it recently took with another hostile state, Cuba.

TRANSFORMATIONAL OR TRANSACTIONAL?

U.S. regional allies need reassurance in large part because the administration has not clarified whether the Iran agreement will be a transactional or transformational instrument. If it is a transactional agreement -- similar to arms control accords signed with the Soviet Union, for example -- then no major change in Iran or U.S.-Iranian relations will be expected. But if the nuclear deal is seen as transformational -- that is, if the administration believes

signing it will quickly shift Iranian attitudes toward a positive, status quo role in the region -- then reassuring skeptical GCC leaders will be difficult.

Indeed, a transactional agreement differs markedly from a transformational one. With a transactional agreement, the underlying objective is the same as the stated objective, in this case to constrain Iran's capacity for nuclear breakout in return for sanctions relief. Any Iranian violations of such a limited agreement could therefore be met with a straightforward, strong response -- the agreement itself would not be sacrosanct, but simply a means toward the end of nuclear containment. Likewise, U.S. reactions to other Iranian depredations in the region would not be inhibited by a standalone, transactional nuclear agreement. As with the USSR, Washington could contain Iranian actions with high confidence that Tehran would separate the wider struggle from a specific, mutually beneficial agreement.

But the dynamic of a transformational agreement is markedly different. Here, the assumption is that Tehran would curb its revolutionary and regional ambitions over time because of the relationships and trust it has allegedly developed with Western officials during the negotiations, as well as its confidence that the Islamic Republic is now an accepted member of the state system. In this case, both the terms of the nuclear deal and any nasty behavior outside it would be of secondary importance. What counts is allowing the transformational dynamic to work its magic. Under this mindset, the administration would likely have a very different reaction to Iranian violations of the agreement or continued regional aggression, as anything beyond accommodating Iranian transgressions could undercut the main goal of transforming the country. This is exactly what worries GCC leaders.

The obvious solution to this conundrum would be for the administration to make crystal clear that the nuclear agreement is transactional only, and not Act One in a transcendental quest. But that task will not be easy given the ambivalence in U.S. statements and actions on Iran thus far. On December 29, for example, the president himself told NPR, "If we can take that big first step [i.e., an agreement], then my hope would be that [it] would serve as the basis for us trying to improve relations over time." He and other U.S. officials have repeatedly hinted to friendly journalists such as Fareed Zakaria and David Ignatius that Iran could become a positive force in the region, while his advisors argue that the Iran agreement would be the international equivalent of ObamaCare.

In contrast, Vice President Biden made the best possible argument for both a transactional interpretation of the nuclear negotiations and a robust reaction to Iranian misbehavior during [his April 30 address at a Washington Institute event \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/30th-anniversary-gala-dinner\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/30th-anniversary-gala-dinner) :

"Folks, this isn't a grand bargain between America and Iran that addresses all the differences between us...It's not a bet on Iran changing its stripes. All of you know that Iran is not a monolith...But you see, that debate is being fought out inside Iran. It's not the premise upon which this deal is made...Just like arms control talks with the Soviet Union -- another regime we fundamentally disagreed with, whose rhetoric and actions were repugnant and unacceptable, whose proxies we forcibly countered around the world -- we negotiated to reduce the nuclear threat...We are working continually to develop the means and capacity to counter Iran's destabilizing activities...And we're prepared to use force."

There is no doubt that Biden believes this, but President Obama is the one calling the shots on Iran policy, not Joe Biden.

THE CUBA PRECEDENT

Given the ambiguity surrounding this issue, it is helpful to analyze President Obama's approach in a similar situation, Cuba. His decision to end the embargo was unquestionably a transformational move -- and totally one-sided as well. The administration did not demand significant "quids" for its "quo" (beyond Cuba's release of a U.S. contractor who never should have been imprisoned in the first place). And in announcing his new policy on

December 17, the president spoke of a "lasting transformation" in Cuba. Since then, he has repeatedly emphasized that engagement stands the best chance of creating new possibilities of freedom for the Cuban people, as in his April 27 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. Similarly, in an April 9 interview with Spanish news agency EFE, he cited engagement as "already showing results...and the enthusiasm of the Cuba people for these changes proves that we're on the right path."

It is not unreasonable to assume that the Cuba decision -- and its timing just as the final phase of Iran negotiations began -- was not a one-off but rather a signal and symbol of where President Obama really wants to go with Iran, in line with his foreign policy preference since 2007 of reaching out to hostile states. To be sure, he has publicly noted the differences between Cuba and Iran, as in the above-cited NPR interview. Yet the two situations remain linked in the minds of many observers, and how he deals with that perception will play a role in the outcome of Camp David.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAMP DAVID

To ensure a successful summit, the administration will have to end its ambiguity about the nature and purpose of the Iran deal. However strongly it might believe in a transformational strategy, the cards -- in Tehran, in Congress, and among America's regional allies -- are stacked against such an approach bearing fruit in the next eighteen months, well after the administration leaves office. Openly pushing that strategy or leaving the question open would only unsettle the GCC and fuel those who oppose even a transactional deal. And, ironically, the possibility of transformation in Iran would likely disappear if the agreement is scuttled.

So what should the administration do at Camp David? Aside from offering the concrete but secondary measures the visitors will be looking for, the president should echo Vice President Biden's April 30 remarks and back them up by taking further steps to resist Iran's encroachments in the Arab world. This includes more robust action in Syria, as called for by the *Washington Post* on May 3. Finally, the administration should make clear through all channels that a transformational relationship with Tehran is not its priority at the moment.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)