

3 Flaws in the Iran Nuclear Framework That Could Undermine a Final Deal

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Apr 28, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/thlatht-ywb-fy-atfaq-alatar-alnwwy-alayrany-mn-shanha-tqwyd-alatfaq-alnhayy\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

If negotiators don't believe they can reach an agreement that addresses Iran's destabilizing regional activities, they should indicate how they will plug the holes in the current deal.

Most of the debate about the Iran nuclear agreement framework announced April 2 has focused on whether it is a good or bad deal. This misses a deeper question: whether the deal as outlined can work. And three design flaws may ultimately spell its doom regardless of who succeeds Barack Obama as president.

First, the framework narrowly addresses Iran's nuclear activities rather than the full range of disputes between Iran and the United States. At one level, this is understandable: Resolving the nuclear crisis is difficult enough without also having to address Iran's support for terrorism and destabilizing regional activities. But this approach presumes that these issues can truly be disentangled from one another. For Iran, pursuit of a nuclear weapon is part of a broader strategy to develop asymmetric and strategic capabilities that support its effort to project power and bolster its global stature. If that strategy does not change -- that is, if Iran continues its support for terrorism, regional adventurism, and related policies -- then its underlying rationale for possessing a nuclear weapons capability will not shift either.

When it comes to U.S. sanctions, few are truly "nuclear-related," a phrase that appears in the Joint Plan of Action concluded in November 2013 and in the Lausanne framework unveiled this month but that is not defined in either document. Most sanctions are linked to multiple Iranian policies, not just its nuclear activities. This means that either these sanctions would continue and Iran would receive scant sanctions relief or that they would be eased and Iran would get a free pass on its non-nuclear policies as well. In the latter case, with our most effective sanctions no longer available, the U.S. would be forced to rely on less effective sanctions or more direct action against Iran. This

makes it likely we would become more involved in regional disputes, not less.

Second, the deal is sure to roil regional dynamics regardless of progress in Iran or between the U.S. and Iran. Critics have asserted that the absence of a requirement in the framework that Tehran dismantle its nuclear infrastructure implies that the Obama administration is gambling on the Iranian leadership becoming friendlier over the next decade. Yet Iran's threshold nuclear capability poses a problem whether or not its relations with the U.S. improve. Even a friendlier regime is unlikely to give up this capability of its own volition, if only for reasons of national pride. And Iran's long history of regional ambition and rivalries is already leading to others in the Middle East seeking to balance or match Iranian capabilities regardless of the nature of the regime in Tehran or its attitude toward the U.S.

Third, the deal may prove unstable and ultimately unsustainable regardless of who next occupies the Oval Office. It is likely that U.S. oil and financial sanctions will initially be waived rather than lifted because the up-front steps required of Iran are not sufficient, and not sufficiently irreversible, to merit immediate lifting of sanctions. This means that President Obama -- and his successor and possibly that person's successor -- will need to certify Iranian compliance and reaffirm the suspension of sanctions every six months. But because the deal does not require full up-front transparency from Iran, and the size of Iran's residual program will make inspection efforts highly complex (and onerous), suspicions about Iranian cheating are likely to be ubiquitous. Turbulence in the region and Iran's lack of commitments regarding other policies that trigger alarm in Washington could frequently affect implementation. Together, these problems suggest that continually reaffirming sanctions relief may prove difficult.

A more sustainable agreement would require more from Iran -- both on regional issues and dismantling its nuclear infrastructure -- while offering it greater sanctions relief upfront. If negotiators believe such a deal is impossible, they should indicate how they will plug the holes in this one.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog "Think Tank." (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/04/28/3-flaws-in-iran-nuclear-framework-that-could-undermine-a-final-deal/>) ❖

Wall Street Journal

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)