

What's Still Missing from the Iran Nuclear Framework

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Although the newly released terms cover more ground than skeptics had feared, significant questions linger on almost every major issue, particularly with regard to enforcement.

In announcing the "key parameters of a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and their international counterparts made much of the accord's historic nature. But is this a historic triumph or a historic mistake? A good deal or a bad deal? The clearest answer is that it is not a deal at all. The framework released Thursday was not signed by any party and presumably is subject to change. The final agreement remains to be negotiated by June 30, though that deadline -- like all others before it -- may prove malleable. Vital details will be negotiated in the coming weeks.

President Obama and other advocates of the agreement would have the public compare this outcome to a war with Iran. Between these two options, many would surely be inclined to welcome the deal. But only Wednesday, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said that other alternatives were under consideration, including increased sanctions or an extension of the talks.

If one compares the parameters released Thursday with past U.S. negotiating positions -- whether under President Obama or President George W. Bush -- it looks less like a triumph. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany made significant concessions, including permitting Iran to retain illegally built facilities at Fordow and Arak; to preserve its stockpiles of enriched uranium; and to phase out most restrictions after 10 years. The administration will argue that these points would have been nice to have (though it's a stretch to describe them, as Secretary Kerry did, as amounting to Iranian "capitulation") but simply weren't achievable.

Read on its merits rather than in comparison to what the U.S. had sought to achieve in the past, the framework certainly covers more ground than skeptics had feared. Yet significant questions linger about almost every major

issue addressed: What will become of Iran's excess enriched uranium and existing stockpile of 20%-enriched uranium? What disclosures and access are required for Iran to "address" questions about its nuclear weapons research? What protocols will be followed when the International Atomic Energy Agency requests access to a suspicious site? Which sanctions will be lifted and under what conditions; and how, practically speaking, can they be "snapped back" if there are violations? How will "significant non-performance" by Iran be defined? How these provisions are addressed is critical to assessing the agreement's value.

In many respects, what has been omitted is as important as what was included. The administration may hope that this paves the way for a better bilateral relationship, but this narrow, technical, and temporary agreement does not address Iran's support for terrorism, its destabilizing regional activities, or its ballistic missile program (an issue that helped to sink a similar agreement with North Korea in the 1990s and 2000s). This agreement would not by itself ensure the long-sought "strategic shift" by Iran.

It is not just the particulars of the nuclear agreement that must be hammered out in the coming weeks. The administration must determine, in partnership with Congress, how to address its broader concerns about Iran in an environment of slackening pressure and how to reassure U.S. allies about our commitment to them and to the Middle East in the wake of an agreement many will see as counter to their interests. If the U.S. wishes to preserve diplomatic progress, it will need to persuade domestic critics of its determination to hold Iran accountable and rebuild the bipartisan consensus on Iran that has been sorely weakened over the past year-plus.

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/2015/04/02/whats-still-missing-from-the-iran-nuclear-framework/>)." ❖

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