Why Some U.S. Allies Disapprove of the Iran Agreement

by **James Jeffrey (/experts/james-jeffrey)**

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Brief Analysis

The problem lies not in the accord's substance, but rather in the lack of trust that the Obama administration is willing and able to run a regional security system requiring potential use of force.

Many of Washington's Middle East partners have reacted negatively to the new "first-step" agreement with Iran. Given their complaints in recent months about making most any deal with Tehran, their response -- in some cases muted, in others more vocal -- is not surprising. Nor is it necessarily wrong or unworthy of attention. The negativity continues not because the deal is particularly one-sided, but rather because U.S. regional partners are understandably concerned about the risky strategic environment in which this agreement -- like any diplomatic or strategic chess move -- must be embedded.

At first glance, the "Joint Plan of Action" signed in Geneva is a standard first step to build confidence, common in negotiations of this type. The P5+1 (i.e., Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany) have agreed to suspend the most peripheral of economic sanctions, on precious metals, refined products, and the like. They will also temporarily freeze U.S. provisions that had steadily decreased the regime's oil exports, allowing Iran to export at its current level (i.e., about 60 percent of its 2011 level) for the duration of the agreement. They will not touch the core U.S., EU, and UN Security Council sanctions, however. In return, Iran will roll back one element of the nuclear program -- its stocks of 20 percent enriched uranium -- while freezing other problematic activities and allowing enhanced international inspections.

Although the accord is obviously not a grand breakthrough, it can help build confidence and establish new precedents, with both sides ratcheting back minor elements of programs that they hope will be substantially reduced down the road -- again, a standard negotiating tactic for complex, low-trust issues. So why are so many of America's regional allies nervous?

Some of their concerns may reflect disappointment that the United States is not going to attack Iran and topple the

regime. Although that scenario was never in the cards, other concerns are more grounded, stemming from various Obama administration policies that certain allies have found disconcerting, debatable, or downright incomprehensible. These include hastily withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, openly leading from behind on Libya, rooting for the ouster of a thirty-year ruler in Egypt, and backing down at the last minute from bombing Syria, all against a backdrop of frequently vacillating rhetoric and shifting positions in Washington. Faced with this barrage of indecision and seeming antipathy about how to confront certain regional threats, Middle Eastern allies -- whose decision to partner with Washington is an existential one -- are increasingly questioning whether America is serious about running an international security system from which it benefits and by which they literally survive.

Once this type of questioning begins, the trust that is essential to any close relationship is replaced by suspicion. Once-cooperative allies begin to adopt a "nose of the camel" mindset in which even the most limited and understandable compromises with foes are viewed as a slippery slope to complete capitulation. This seems to be what is happening with the Iran agreement. Ignoring the specifics of the accord, some regional allies perceive it as further "proof" that the United States is not reliable. In their view, if they do not criticize Washington for taking this initial and relatively minor step, the administration will be encouraged to take further and much more damaging steps on the road to alleged appeasement.

Of course, Washington cannot run a global security system without making tactical agreements with foes, at times nourished with compromises -- the U.S. democratic system demands it, particularly at a time when numerous polls show that many Americans oppose new military action in the region, including in Syria. But such agreements and their attendant compromises are only acceptable to our regional partners if Washington simultaneously demonstrates resolve, toughness, and, if necessary, a willingness to fight.

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger knew this when they made extensive, historic pacts with China, North Vietnam, and the USSR. Although many allies were disconcerted at the time, they did not cry out publicly or hamstring U.S. diplomacy. Why? Because from the skies above Hanoi, to an island off Cambodia, to the sands of the Sinai, they saw proof after proof of American readiness to stand by allies, threaten and punish enemies, and throw Americans into combat.

Allies in the Middle East do not see that proof today. One could say, "Well, America is a democracy, and many Americans don't want to do that these days." That is true, of course, but another truth is that Americans almost never really want to go to war, whether "these days" or in the past. Therefore, presidential leadership is needed to persuade citizens that tough measures, even military steps, are sometimes necessary to maintain the global security system they benefit from, and to convince allies that Washington means what it says. This is not happening today.

A fix is feasible, but it has to involve more than talk. President Obama has used clear and tough language of late, from the four Middle Eastern strategic priorities he laid out in his September 24 UN speech to his remark that America has been the enforcing "anchor" of global security for many decades in his September 10 Syria speech. The administration could back up this talk with concrete measures such as:

- Finding ways to save defense dollars other than high-visibility naval reductions in the Middle East
- Finding a way to get military equipment fully flowing to Egypt, an ally that Washington needs badly
- Expediting the slow bureaucratic processes that can impede weapons sales and on-the-ground counterterrorism assistance to key regional partners
- Engaging the president personally and intensively in reaching a troop presence agreement with Afghanistan and reversing Turkey's decision to purchase Chinese air-defense systems
- Increasing highest-level exchanges with the most important regional allies

- Finding a credible means of pressuring Russia and Iran on Syria

Above all, the next time a crisis looms, the administration should not give the impression that job one is avoiding any military response, however limited, justified, and minimally risky.

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

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