



PREVENTING AN
IRANIAN NUCLEAR
BREAKOUT

U.S.-Israel Coordination

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STRATEGIC REPORT 8

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COVER: U.S. President Barack Obama meets with Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office, March 5, 2012.
(REUTERS/Jason Reed)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

THE IRAN NUCLEAR impasse deeply concerns the United States, a leader in the global non-proliferation regime and a country heavily involved in ensuring security in the Middle East. And the problem is acutely felt in Israel, the country most threatened by an Iranian nuclear weapon. Many in Israel see the problem as becoming so urgent as to require decisive resolution soon, and they are not necessarily convinced that the United States shares their perceptions about what must be done.

In March 2012, President Barack Obama declared, “Iran’s leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”¹ That statement not only addressed a core Israeli concern; it also reflected implied awareness of a key finding of a 2008 Washington Institute–sponsored task force report, *Strengthening the Partnership: How to Deepen U.S.–Israel Cooperation on the Iranian Nuclear Challenge*:

Americans should recognize that deterrence is, in Israeli eyes, an unattractive alternative to prevention, because, if deterrence fails, Israel would suffer terribly. The consequence is that any suggestion that a policy of deterrence is America’s preferred option only reinforces the idea among many Israelis that, in the end, they may be left alone to bear the brunt of the Iranian nuclear threat.²

These words helped contribute to a common American-Israeli understanding on the Iranian nuclear issue, even as the report acknowledged gaps between the two sides. In spring and summer 2012, with the Iranian nuclear threat having intensified,

The Washington Institute convened a strategic dialogue with a small group of knowledgeable and influential Israelis and Americans to discuss U.S.–Israel consultation on advancing the policy of prevention. This report represents the authors’ conclusions after participating in that dialogue.

The United States and Israel agree that Iran should not have nuclear weapons, but they may not see eye-to-eye about how to proceed regarding the impasse with Iran. High-profile disagreements surfaced in September 2012 about setting a “redline,” or deadline, for termination of Iran’s program, issues discussed at length in this report. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu has made repeated public calls for Washington to define a line, declaring that by March or April 2013 Iran would be 90 percent of the way toward having weapons-grade nuclear fuel. He cautioned,

You have to place that redline before them now, before it’s too late....They are in the last twenty yards [and] you can’t let them score a touchdown, because that would have unbelievable consequences, grievous consequences, for the peace and security of us all, of the world really.³

The Israeli position, as outlined by an anonymous senior Israeli official, is that “Without a clear redline, Iran will not cease its race toward a nuclear weapon,” implying that with a redline, Iran would back off. Nonetheless, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stated that “We’re not setting deadlines,” a position reiterated by other senior U.S. officials.⁴

1. Speech to AIPAC, March 4, 2012.

2. Signatories to that 2008 statement included Thomas Donilon, presently the national security advisor to the president; Susan Rice, presently the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; and Wendy Sherman, presently the undersecretary of state for political affairs.

3. Netanyahu, *Meet the Press*, Sept. 16, 2012.

4. Joel Greenberg, “U.S., Israel at Odds over Drawing a ‘Red Line’ for Iran,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 11, 2012, A9. A senior U.S. official said, “We need some ability for the president to have decision-making room. We have a red line, which is a nuclear weapon.” See Mark Lander and Helene Cooper, “Obama Rebuffs Netanyahu on Setting Limits on Iran’s Nuclear Program,” *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2012, A5.

Although Obama and Netanyahu spoke on the phone for an hour on September 11, the administration has apparently been unable to convince Israel that the United States would be able to both identify an Iranian dash to the nuclear weapons threshold and then act militarily in short enough order. At least a few Israeli leaders are concerned that despite its best intentions, the United States will not be able to act in time to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The extent to which such a view is held sharply increases the probability of an Israeli strike, an action that Washington strongly opposes. Furthermore, Netanyahu has said that “those in the international community who refuse to put redlines

before Iran don’t have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.”⁵

Disagreements about the approach to the Iranian nuclear program, if they persist, could complicate the U.S.-Israel relationship. Coming in the midst of a presidential election, this situation is particularly ripe for breeding conspiracy theories and creating ill-will all around. Even more dangerously, Tehran could interpret this public rift as an indication that opposition to its nuclear program is so deeply divided that Iran could continue its nuclear activities without much fear of consequences. Thus, this report’s recommendations about how to coordinate U.S.-Israel actions become even more timely.

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5. Quoted in David Sanger and Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Leader Stiffens Call for U.S. to Set Iran Trigger,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2012, A1. House Intelligence Committee chairman Mike Roger (R-Mich.) described witnessing a “sharp exchange” between Netanyahu and U.S. ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro. See Jeffrey Goldberg, “Intelligence Committee Chair Describes Explosive Confrontation between Netanyahu and American Ambassador,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2012.

2 | UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

THE QUESTION of how to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is particularly challenging because of significant complications involving each of the three main actors: for the United States, the interplay of various U.S. objectives regarding Iran; for Israel, fears about the U.S. approach; and for Iran, a strategy of ambiguity and deniability.

U.S. MULTIPLE OBJECTIVES

In striving to resolve the nuclear impasse with Tehran, Washington wants, first, an outcome that reinforces the global nonproliferation regime, discouraging other countries from replicating Iran's violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The United States does not want to see a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, nor does it want to see the prospects of proliferation of nuclear technology to terrorists. In a broad sense, the United States sees Iran with a bomb as profoundly changing the balance of power in the Middle East, intimidating moderates and emboldening extremists. This, in turn, holds the prospect of disrupting energy supplies from a vital region. Second, though never openly stated by U.S. officials, the United States wants to inflict a strategic setback on the Iranian regime, which challenges Washington across the region (in Iraq and Afghanistan, and by supporting subversion in Gulf countries) and sponsors terrorism against the United States and its friends.

The emphasis on nonproliferation is central to differences between the U.S. and Israeli approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue. Nonproliferation is not a central Israeli concern per se, although Israel certainly does not want a Middle East nuclear arms race. By contrast, nonproliferation is a goal deeply valued by the Obama administration, which has been the force behind two international summits devoted to the issue as well as the first-ever Security Council meeting involving heads of government to focus on nuclear security, with Obama

serving as the chair. The reduction of nuclear weapons is also a centerpiece of U.S. defense strategy. For these reasons, Obama certainly does not want to be the U.S. leader to preside over the unraveling of the NPT, and he is convinced that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would spark an arms race in the Middle East, and possibly on a wider scale. A related fear is that nuclear weapons could end up in the hands of terrorists—a terrifying prospect for both Obama and George W. Bush before him. Concerns about proliferation are shared by the other P5+1 delegations (from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), which consist overwhelmingly of proliferation experts, not Iran experts. France has taken perhaps the firmest stance in the P5+1 against Iran's nuclear capabilities. Their position, it should be noted, is based on broad proliferation concerns rather than Iran's particular threat to Israel.

The United States is focused not only on curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions but also on targeting the regime's other aggressive behaviors, among them human rights abuses and state support for terrorism. These other issues have not had for Israel anything approaching the weight of the nuclear question, and the U.S. focus on this cluster of offenses could actually complicate the process of resolving the nuclear weapons impasse. Were the United States to make concessions on other strategic issues, Tehran might be more willing to concede on the nuclear issue. But the United States cannot offer to lift many (if any) of its sanctions in the event of a nuclear deal because profound differences will remain about Iran's state support for terrorism and its human rights record; and the regime knows it is beset on many fronts and is correspondingly suspicious. Should a nuclear deal be passed, Iran's leaders fear the West will simply shift to another issue, such as human rights, as the reason for exerting sustained pressure.

Even the achievement of a nuclear deal could pose complications for perceived U.S. strategic interests. This is because, in a deal, the P5+1 will likely accept provisions designed to allow Iran to save face and, in effect, claim “victory.” Such a public relations effort by Tehran could flout the notion of a U.S.-led strategic defeat of Islamic Republic hardliners. Any nuclear deal is therefore likely to encounter significant domestic U.S. criticism as being contrary to greater U.S. strategic interests.

Finally, there is the matter of the Iran regime’s existential angst. Rightly, the Islamic Republic’s leaders sense that the Western powers would like to see them deposed and replaced by a more moderate, humane leadership. But the idea of promoting regime change in the Middle East from the outside has been problematic since the Iraq war, as reinforced by the extent to which U.S. calls for the Libyan and Syrian regimes to change quickly morphed into debates about U.S. military assistance to armed opposition groups whose character is not known in the United States. Iran is correctly seen as a much more difficult place to promote regime change than any of the Arab Spring states. The common view in Washington is that, much as with the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic is doomed by its own contradictions. The attraction of many Iranians to the West, and their wish that Iran were more Western itself, is seen by regime hardliners as constituting an existential threat.

Recent U.S. actions in other countries involved in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation provide final encouragement to Iran to hold the line on its nuclear activities. Whereas Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi, who gave up his WMD, was overthrown by a rebellion actively supported by NATO, the North Korean leadership held on to its nuclear weapons, remains in power, and is the potential recipient of significant financial assistance from the United States. Possession of nuclear weapons, therefore, can easily be interpreted as deterring the United States from carrying out its true regime change objective.

ISRAEL’S CONCERNS

Public debate in Israel has exposed deeply held concerns about the U.S. approach to Iran’s nuclear program. U.S. policymakers, in turn, have devoted much effort to addressing them.

Many in Israel are highly skeptical of the U.S.-led approach taken by the P5+1 toward Iran. Concerns center on the possibility that Iran will exploit perceived Western gullibility, using negotiations as political cover to continue its enrichment program unabated. Israel worries that no matter how little progress is made, Washington will never call off the negotiations, and as long as negotiations continue, the United States will be handcuffed militarily. No less ominous, from Israel’s perspective, is the possibility that negotiation-savvy Tehran could field diplomatic offers designed to lull the P5+1 into complacency and drive a wedge between Washington and Israel. Fears hold that a resulting deal could leave Iran with considerable breakout capabilities.

Israel’s skepticism over negotiations extends to the area of confidence-building measures. An interim deal focused on halting the most advanced form of enrichment alone, goes the thinking, will be achieved only at a heavy price in sanctions relief for Iran. Sanctions relief would lift overall pressure on Tehran, hindering the possibility of further progress in talks. Not only could an interim agreement “stop the clock” of international pressure on Iran more than stopping Iran’s nuclear progress, but the P5+1 would face a near-impossible task should it attempt to reapply the previous measures. Based on the historical experience of Arab-Israeli agreements, some Israelis argue that nothing in the Middle East is so permanent as an interim agreement. Israel sharply disputes the premise of confidence-building, since it believes there is no time for protracted negotiations, considering Israel has limited time to act if Iran is not going to compromise on its nuclear program.

Given Israeli officials’ sense of urgency, they would like to see the nuclear diplomatic talks come to a head. In such a scenario, the focus would not be on confidence-building measures but instead

on an end-state aimed at ensuring that Iran does not become capable of achieving more than civilian nuclear power. This approach reflects Israel's nonbelief in the fundamental premise underlying the talks: that the sanctions will bite and lead to a change in Iran's policies.

Israel's critique of the P5+1 policy invariably encompasses the role of a strike. Officials in Israel believe that sanctions and diplomacy stand a chance of succeeding only if Iran actually believes the United States will strike its nuclear facilities should the preliminary options fail. In recent remarks, Netanyahu made clear that he does not believe Iran fears a strike from U.S. or international actors.¹ A policy debate in Israel questions whether the United States will act. While some believe the United States has no intention of striking Iran's facilities, others argue that the United States will strike for reasons ranging from the maintenance of regional stability to the need to uphold the nuclear nonproliferation regime, a pillar of postwar U.S. foreign policy. Yet even those who foresee a U.S. strike believe the action will come after Israel's window has closed, sometime in 2013. As such, Israel will have foregone its

option without a guarantee of U.S. action. From this discussion comes the conclusion that Israel cannot risk waiting.

As for Israelis who think that America has no intention of striking, they believe Washington will ultimately adopt a policy of containment, despite the public repudiation of this voiced by President Obama and repeated by other senior officials. No one can know for certain how U.S. leaders will react if a crisis arrives, since past statements may not be a good predictor of future policies in real, rather than theoretical, scenarios.² Whatever the U.S. path, Washington's slower clock may eventually, and unwittingly, provide the incentive for Israel to act on its own.

In assessing the debate within Israel, commentators often misinterpret the view of opponents of an Israeli strike. Those security officials (present and former) and Israeli cabinet ministers who are advising the Netanyahu government to resist striking Iran hold this view not because they oppose a strike altogether, or because they support containment of Iran as applied to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but because they believe the responsibility of striking falls to the United States. Both schools in the Israeli debate are united on the view that Iran's declared enmity toward Israel is real, not theoretical. Even if Israeli officials could ignore the many bloodcurdling threats from Iran's leaders—which they cannot—there would still remain Iran's actions. Iran has spent more than \$5 billion—some estimate much more—funding and arming every group dedicated to killing Israeli civilians and eliminating the state of Israel, such as Hizballah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran has proven that it will provide the arms with which to attack Israeli civilians. Israel, for its part, will not remain indifferent to Iran's established track record of hostility. In the

1. "All the sanctions and diplomacy so far have not set back the Iranian program by one iota. We need a strong and credible military threat coupled with sanctions in order to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon," Netanyahu said; see Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu, Romney Stress Danger of a Nuclear Iran in Jerusalem Meeting," *Diplomacy & Defense* (blog), *Haaretz*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/misc/iphone-blog-article/netanyahu-romney-stress-danger-of-a-nuclear-iran-in-jerusalem-meeting-1.454391>. In his meeting with the U.S. defense secretary, he turned toward Panetta and declared, "You yourself said a few months ago that when all else fails, America will act. But these declarations have also not yet convinced the Iranians to stop their program." Netanyahu continued, "However forceful our statements, they have not convinced Iran that we are serious about stopping them. Right now the Iranian regime believes that the international community does not have the will to stop its nuclear program. This must change and it must change quickly, because time to resolve this issue peacefully is running out." See Attila Somfalvi, "PM to Panetta: Time Running Out on Peaceful Iran Solution," *Ynetnews.com*, August 1, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4263330,00.html>.

2. The classic study on the many factors that play into crisis decisions is Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Longman, 1999). One of the central theses of the original edition is that the decisionmaking process includes many elements—bureaucratic, organizational, and so on.

absence of U.S. action, the internal debate is likely to shift, over time, in the favor of those who believe that the only alternative is an Israeli strike.

Another argument used by some Israelis for a preemptive strike is that Washington will be too late in concluding that Iran is about to get a bomb. These fears date to the ultimately inaccurate identification of WMD in Iraq by U.S. intelligence and the scars inflicted by this failure. In this view, the U.S. intelligence community showed skittishness in its response to the discovery in 2007 of a Syrian nuclear reactor well that had no purpose other than to build weapons. Prior to this discovery, U.S. intelligence had not found a reprocessing plant for weaponization and so was unwilling to state with confidence that Syria's objective was to obtain weapons. U.S. failure to act was a post-Iraq phenomenon: the Bush administration and the intelligence community did not want to strike because they wanted to avoid being accused of acting precipitously. Israel would argue that the price of this reluctance to attack before the reprocessing plant was found reflected a willingness to allow the reactor to go "hot" and thereby preclude any prospects of an attack beyond that point.

Of course, there are differences between the Syria and Iran cases. For Israel, however, a commonality would be Israel's concern that the United States may not recognize that the final relevant point for decisionmakers is less the issue of weaponization and more the ability of the United States or Israel to intervene and halt the program.

Iran's rate of uranium production has also heightened Israeli worries. At present, Iran already has enriched to reactor-grade enough uranium to produce at least four bombs when further enriched to weapons-grade,³ amplifying skepticism in Israel that the United States will know in real time about an Iranian breakout. The conversion of the current

product into weapons-grade uranium would not take long, and Israel thinks Iran could readily produce a nuclear device and possibly a bomb—one that perhaps could be mated with Iran's long-range missiles. So, as with its overarching view of Iran's nuclear program, Israel thinks Iran is too close to a bomb for comfort—and Israel's comfort level anyway is much lower than that of the United States and its partners in the P5+1.

Looking outside the immediate region, ordinary Israelis can take little comfort in a U.S. track record that includes failure to prevent North Korea and Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons. Solemn statements and policy pledges from Washington—under three presidents representing both major political parties—preceded the ascent by these states to nuclear weapons capability. Yet at the point of breakout for both North Korea and Pakistan, the United States did little. If Washington now fails to act against Iran, Israel will be justified in wondering whether the United States will have credibility on *any* future Middle East issue.

As Israel's window for action closes, its leaders worry that the United States will not only fail to act within that window but will also ask that Israel refrain from acting on its own, on the reassurance of future U.S. action. Such a request would challenge the very ethos of Zionism, which is founded on self-reliance. It would be seen to imply Israel's utter dependence on, not simply trust in, the United States, a dynamic with which Israel would not sit easily. Such an Israeli response, moreover, would be underlain not just by an essential Israeli outlook but by a traumatic national past. American policymakers often do not appreciate how deeply Israel mistrusts foreign security guarantees. In June 1967, in what would be a formative experience for Israel's security doctrine, President Johnson directly refused, at a meeting with senior Israeli officials, to honor his predecessor's explicit and written pledge to guarantee security of navigation through the Straits of Tiran—a firm promise that had been central to Israel's agreement to

3. Damien Pearse, "Iran Has Enough Uranium for Five Nuclear Weapons, Claims U.S. Think-tank," *Guardian*, May 26, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/26/iran-uranium-nuclear-weapons>.

withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in 1957.⁴ For many Israelis, the principle that no other state can be relied on for protection is the single most important guide to public policy.

These analyses do not imply that Israel would be indifferent to U.S. reaction to a unilateral Israeli strike. Israeli officials are mindful that a true crisis in U.S.-Israel relations could result from shortcomings or aftereffects of a unilateral attack, such as strong retaliation by Iran, hostile reception by other countries, or limited damage inflicted on the nuclear infrastructure, not to mention a possibly harsh short-term response from the Americans.

Finally, according to a common Israeli view, a linchpin of the U.S.-Israel relationship is that Americans do not spill blood for Israel. Along with its moral component, this view has the obvious strategic purpose of ensuring broad, long-term American public support for the relationship while dovetailing with the Israeli ethos of self-reliance. So, while Israelis believe in the genuine U.S. interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a bomb—and they would in many ways prefer a U.S. to an Israeli strike—sensitivity is high regarding the perception that Israel could be asking the United States to do its bidding. All this occurs against the unsettling backdrop of perceived Israeli government challenges to Obama's friendship and to his strength on Iran's nuclear issue—and corresponding encouragement to his opponents in Washington—whatever the actual evidence.

IRAN'S STRATEGY OF AMBIGUITY AND DENIABILITY

Ambiguity and deniability are principles much prized in Iranian society but obviously troublesome when it comes to international agreements, such as the Iranian regime's pledge in 2003–2004 to freeze its uranium enrichment. Much to the

surprise of the British, French, and Germans, who pushed for the freeze, Tehran claimed that the agreement did not prevent it from continuing to install centrifuges so long as nuclear material was not introduced into them. Nor, in Iran's view, did the freeze prevent continued research with a limited number of centrifuges.

In pursuing nuclear weapons capability, Iran could apply creative ambiguity to any redline. For instance, Iran could act in the image of its neighbor Pakistan by producing all the parts for a nuclear weapon—indeed, for several such weapons—and almost entirely assembling them. Yet, because in Pakistan's case the last screw had not been tightened, the U.S. government certified to Congress each year that Pakistan did not have a nuclear weapon—a certification influenced by Pakistan's strategic centrality for delivering aid to the Afghan mujahedin fighting against the Soviet invasion.⁵ In other words, even a statement that Iran will not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons is subject to interpretation.

The effectiveness of Iran's strategy of ambiguity and deniability could be magnified by the unwillingness of some in the international community to agree that Iran had crossed a threshold, thereby justifying a military response. The temptation would be strong to grasp at straws for any excuse to avoid military strikes they see as potentially catastrophic.

Based on the potential for ambiguity and the limitations of intelligence, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak has spoken out against giving much weight to any Western redline for action, such as an explicit "breakout" order by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to build a weapon. He has said that Iran knows of its vulnerability to foreign intelligence and thus pursues a strategy tailored to avoid ever crossing any redline the West may define.

4. This episode is recounted in detail in Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 11–12, 112–116.

5. Paul L. Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitin, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons: Proliferation and Security Issues*, CRS Report for Congress (Congressional Research Service, Jan. 13, 2011), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/155624.pdf>.

3 | TAKING BACK THE INITIATIVE

MUCH OF THE TENSION in the U.S.-Israel consultations about the Iranian nuclear impasse involves timing: the speed at which Iran is progressing, the pace of negotiations, the moment when the current direction of diplomacy must be judged an inadequate policy response. The general thrust of Israel's concerns is that Iran's nuclear progress has reached such a worrisome point that Israel's vital national security interests are at stake.

While the U.S. government is working assiduously to resolve the nuclear impasse, many U.S. statements—including some of the toughest ones—imply that the United States will keep up diplomatic negotiations until Iran crosses a redline, generally defined as possession of nuclear weapons. This suggestion concerns Israel not only with regard to the U.S. sense of urgency on the problem but—at least as important—because it empowers Iran to decide when exactly talks fail. Knowledge of this U.S. approach also will allow Iran to cross the nuclear threshold at a propitious moment, such as when the world is preoccupied elsewhere or when Iran's help is needed with some other international problem. Should Iran have this volition, the nuclear breakout will happen at the best time for Tehran and the worst for Washington.

This prospect shows decisively why the Iranian nuclear impasse should be resolved as soon as possible: the longer it goes on, the greater the risk to the global nonproliferation regime and the more problematic for the authority of the UN Security Council. Therefore, while Washington outlines a diplomatic approach to resolve the issue peacefully, it must be careful not to be trapped by self-imposed redlines if all options have failed and the U.S. strike option is about to expire.

A more ambitious approach to diplomacy aimed at getting quicker and more far-reaching results will help the United States recapture the initiative

on timing versus Iran. Such an approach would also do much to reduce the tensions between Israel and the United States. Israeli officials' skepticism of U.S. rhetoric will likely be alleviated if they know Washington, not Tehran, will be determining when the issue comes to a head.

SETTING BENCHMARKS

To seize the initiative—i.e., to show its determination to stop Iran's nuclear progress rather than allow interminable, unproductive discussions—Washington must establish benchmarks to be met in order for diplomatic negotiations to continue. As demonstrated by a July 3, 2012, meeting in Geneva, attended by nuclear experts from Iran and elsewhere, Iran is taking a leisurely approach to timing:

Meeting(s) between Dr. Saeed Jalili [of Iran] and Lady Ashton [of Britain] and the representatives of the other six countries: every 3 months; Expert meeting(s) of the 7 countries chaired by deputies of Dr. Jalili and Lady Ashton: prior to each main meeting.¹

At a rate of one meeting per quarter, the talks could drag on for years while Iran strides forward on its nuclear program. Such an outcome is unacceptable, but showing that the negotiations have failed will prove a challenge if Iran insists it is prepared to keep talking and progress is being made toward an eventual agreement. A mechanism must be established to forcibly speed up the pace toward a resolution.

In dealing with Iran—as in other negotiations—benchmarks offer a more effective alternative to a deadline, which would allow Tehran to stall until the last minute and then set out proposals that may

1. The Iranian proposal, "Some Facts regarding Iran's Nuclear Talks with P5+1," was provided by Iranian authorities to certain Westerners, who then posted the contents online. See <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/index.php/2012/07/iran-seeks-sustained-dialogue/>.

seem attractive at first glance but are really unhelpful. In establishing benchmarks, Washington and its fellow negotiators can create urgency through a set of actions Iran must take to show that diplomacy is working. The benchmark model is based on results, not the calendar, taking away Iran's ability to run down the clock.

Once Iran experiences the benchmark model, it will see that a crisis is near—and that the crisis will not come at Iran's decision to try for a nuclear breakout. Rather, when diplomacy fails because Iran fails to meet the established benchmarks, more forceful measures will follow. In this scenario, Iran will feel the pressure, but it will still be able to emerge from the impasse by meeting the benchmarks. Obama has repeatedly stated that the window for diplomacy is closing. While U.S. officials should state and restate the U.S. commitment to diplomacy, they should also emphasize that time is limited because Iran's progress is threatening to make diplomacy irrelevant. The remaining P5+1 and other allied governments could reinforce these points by making them publicly and repeatedly. In pushing a diplomatic path for Iran that involves greater accountability, the United States should seek the broadest possible support, in any appropriate international forum, for the principle that nuclear diplomacy must lead to results soon, or else the consequences will be grave.

Benchmarks, of course, carry their own dangers. Iran may conclude, for example, that to maintain its edge it must accelerate its nuclear progress in the interim. Any timetable, therefore, must be accompanied by the firm corollary that if Iran accelerates its objectionable activities, those actions themselves would justify military action.

The best way to improve the chances for a negotiated settlement is for the West to keep increasing the pressure on Iran. There is much wisdom in the quip that Iran does not respond to pressure; it only responds to great pressure. And since the latest round of negotiations began with the April 2012 Istanbul talks, both the United States and the European Union have adopted additional sanctions

against Iran, showing that they are prepared to combine negotiations with more sanctions.

Adding to the impact of sanctions is the so-called shadow war, which includes acts of sabotage, cyberwarfare, direct action, and recruitment of defectors. These deniable covert steps allow those responsible to act against Iran's nuclear program without creating a public challenge to Tehran that would call for retaliation. Such steps help slow Iran's nuclear progress, keeping the window for diplomacy open longer. They also show Iran that the West is serious about a military solution if Iran refuses to compromise.

ENHANCING LEGITIMACY

Along with setting benchmarks, the United States can seize back the initiative on Iran by taking steps to enhance the legitimacy of its approach and, in turn, exposing the unreasonableness of the Tehran regime. This means that if the West ultimately resorts to harsher measures than sanctions, then the international community will recognize that the blame lies with Tehran.

A precedent for success can be found in Obama's 2009 efforts to engage Iran, which demonstrated clearly that the United States wanted dialogue against Iran's obstructionism. In setting terms for future dialogue, the P5+1 must find ways to show not only that Iran is refusing reasonable offers but also that the negotiators are prepared to take yes for an answer—that were Iran to commit to resolving the impasse and act concretely in that direction, then resolution of the impasse would be possible.

The perception that diplomacy has been fully exhausted will be central to ensuring the international legitimacy of U.S. efforts to act against Iran, either through sanctions or by military force. Such a perception will be equally important in response to any Israeli actions, whether a strike on the nuclear infrastructure or shadow operations such as assassinations or cyberattacks (e.g., the recent dissemination of the Stuxnet virus).

The specific nature of the perceived failure of talks must also determine the harsher course to

follow. As Winston Churchill famously said, in capturing the repugnance of war, “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” Correspondingly, international public opinion will likely be unsympathetic to large-scale preemptive action—especially one lasting several weeks and resulting in many casualties—if the perception lingers that talks had not entirely run their course.

Given that reality, it would only be natural to expect President Obama to explore middle courses should the need for tougher action against Iran become necessary. Already, the U.S. president has shown an interest in shadow activities, authorizing frequent Predator strikes, Special Forces operations, intrusive intelligence collection (as exposed when a U.S. drone was downed over Iran in December 2011), and cyberattacks. Such quiet intervention could have great advantages over a large-scale attack by reducing the likelihood of international censure and retaliation by Iran. Additional covert steps and other intermediate, unacknowledged military direct action now considered too risky would be well worth considering should talks falter. Realistically, however, it will be a great challenge to identify “shadow measures” sufficiently robust to materially slow Iran’s nuclear program.

Should a large-scale strike be deemed necessary, the international legitimacy of the strike will be central to how successful it is in delaying Iran’s nuclear progress. At the core of this discussion will be whether the multilateral coalition against Iran will remain intact following a strike, as a bulwark against Iran reconstituting its nuclear program by reimporting materiel. Such points have been asserted by Michele Flournoy, a former top Pentagon official in the Obama administration, among others.² A unilateral Israeli attack perceived as premature would prove particularly damaging to the international coalition behind sanctions needed to prevent Iran from reconstituting its program. Nor is this risk lost upon Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Amos Yadlin,

the former head of Israel’s military intelligence, who recently said, “A strike is the start of a long campaign, or else the result is both bombing Iran and Iran with a bomb.”³

STRENGTHENING POLICY CONSENSUS

A third necessity for regaining U.S. initiative will be securing broad support for the steps to come. At present, the consensus is fragile—both within the United States and between the United States and its key Middle East partners, not to mention Russia and China—on all key issues regarding the strategy toward the impasse, including the role of military preparations, the appropriate time frame for negotiations, and the contents of a prospective agreement with Iran. Yet the limited progress thus far owes precisely to the consensus already achieved, particularly as a result of the many countries that have limited their transactions with Iran. In addition, the diplomacy has been aided enormously by Iran’s inability to create open splits among the P5+1. Broadening and deepening the consensus should therefore be a strong priority.

But achieving consensus at home should be the top U.S. priority, among both elites and the broader public. The unfortunate reality is that many Obama opponents in the United States, U.S. allies in the region, and Iranian hardliners suspect that the United States speaks loudly but carries a small stick, that its tough words are little more than a tacit acquiescence to a de facto Iranian nuclear weapons capability—even if this capability would corrode U.S. influence in the region and its relations with the U.S. allies in question. The more Iran believes that the United States will act on its declared policy, the more likely Tehran will be to agree to a nuclear compromise. To build this consensus, Washington should first consult widely and deeply at home. Policymakers should seek support from Congress rather than regarding congressional

2. Michele Flournoy, remarks at the INSS Conference on Security Challenges, May 30, 2012.

3. Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, remarks at the INSS Conference on Security Challenges, May 30, 2012.

action as a nuisance or interference. Even as a side benefit of this process will be a lower profile for the Iran issue in the upcoming U.S. elections, the main driver toward such consensus should be the U.S. national interest, not election factors. There might be benefit after the election of seeking a nonbinding bipartisan resolution from Congress that makes clear that while the United States seeks a peaceful resolution to the Iran conflict, Washington will support direct military action if such a last resort is required.

U.S. policymakers should avoid grandstanding statements that either lack public support or cannot be backed up with action. Likewise, these leaders, along with those in all parts of the spectrum, should avoid airing internal policy debates. Those voicing opposition to military action should set their comments in a context that does not rule this, or any other, option out. Use of military force is always unfortunate, but it is sometimes the least-bad option. And in discussing a possible preemptive strike, U.S. leaders can remove some of the shock from the discourse by publicly hinting that the United States has for years been engaged in a shadow war against Iran's nuclear program, with publicly acknowledged sabotage, penetration of Iran's airspace for intelligence collection, and recruitment of defectors, as well as alleged cyberwarfare. None of those actions are particularly friendly. Since the United States is already wielding at least a midsize stick against Iran's nuclear program, Washington should take credit for actions that reinforce the credibility of its present threats.

The wider and deeper the domestic U.S. consensus behind prevention—the policy endorsed by both Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney—rather than containment, the more likely Iran will accept that U.S. policy is unlikely to soften after the U.S. election. No matter who wins the American election in November, Iran must be persuaded that U.S. terms for a deal will remain tough. The alternative—the expectation of a softening in the U.S. position post-November—gives the regime every incentive to stall until the policy changes.

The second most important type of consensus for U.S. policymakers, next to domestic consensus, is that with America's Middle East allies, the states most affected by Iran's nuclear program. Chief among these allies is Israel. And the United States must consult closely with Israel not because of Israel's alleged bellicosity but because of the character of Iran's threats against Israel. Neither Israel nor the U.S.-Israel relationship is helped by the suggestion that Israel is playing the bad cop to the P5+1's good cop. Further, under no circumstance should Washington imply that the main threat to international security would come from Israeli preemptive action against Iran's nuclear program rather than from the nuclear program itself.

In seeking consensus, U.S. and Israeli leaders must strive to stop their occasional sniping and coordinate their statements on nuclear negotiations and the necessary terms of any agreement with Iran. A coordinated stance should include three key elements: (1) a call to boost leverage vis-à-vis Iran by vigorously applying sanctions, as a way of demonstrating both sides' commitment to the diplomatic process; (2) constant reminders that the issue at stake is nuclear proliferation—a risk to the security of the community of nations—an emphasis that defines the Iranian nuclear impasse as a global concern rather than some special Israeli interest; and (3) a clear statement that neither side wants an agreement at any price and both believe a bad agreement could facilitate rather than impede Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability.

Once the United States is certain that it has reached a common understanding with Israel, then Washington can confidently launch parallel discussions with key European and Arab leaders. A broad consensus already exists both in Europe and in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in favor of a firm stance on Iran's nuclear challenge. Turning that consensus into common actions is central to persuading Iran of the price it will pay for continued intransigence. Whether on diplomacy or economic sanctions, U.S. actions with regard to the Iranian nuclear impasse will be much more effective

if Europe and the GCC states act in the same vein. Both have shown impressive resolve that has been insufficiently appreciated by U.S. elite opinion: Europe in cutting off purchases of Iran's oil despite the depth of the European financial crisis, and the GCC states in curtailing highly lucrative trade with Iran. Washington would do well to applaud this cooperation frequently and at a high level: it highlights the effectiveness of American leadership.

Furthermore, common action from this broad group—Europe, the United States, Israel, and the GCC states—is the best way to encourage other countries to join in. In particular, a common stance by this broad group makes more likely cooperation by Russia and China on the Iranian nuclear issue. Neither Russia nor China views Iran in the same way as does the United States, and no amount of diplomacy is going to change that fact. Nor is it likely that U.S. arguments will soften Russian skepticism about what Iran can accomplish in the nuclear sphere or Chinese relative indifference to nuclear proliferation. A much more plausible scenario is that Russian and Chinese cooperation on the approach to Iran's nuclear program will arise primarily because they value their relations with the United States, Europe, and the GCC states. The most fruitful way to secure Russian and Chinese cooperation is to first form a solid consensus with America's allies in Europe and the Middle East, using that broad coalition as the basis for then approaching Moscow and Beijing.

CONVINCING IRAN IT CANNOT GET CLOSE TO HAVING A BOMB

At present, Iran sees no barriers to nuclear progress, a chief reason why it considers time to be on its side. Should Iran conclude it will never be allowed to get close to acquiring a nuclear weapon—that if necessary, its facilities would be struck—it will be more likely to compromise.

As implied earlier, deniable means are one way to slow Iran's nuclear program and, in turn, to stop Iran from getting close to having a nuclear bomb. Alongside the examples discussed before—facilitating

defectors, introducing destructive software, and assassinating program personnel—are arranging what appear to be industrial accidents and sabotaging materiel entering Iran. The actual effect of such acts cannot be measured, but the more doubt that can be sown in Iranian leaders' minds with regard to their development of nuclear weapons, the more reason they will have to reach a compromise. And the widened window that results from the slowing of Iran's nuclear program means not only more time for diplomacy but also, perhaps, more time before Israel feels its opportunity to strike has ended. The U.S.-Israel discussion on use of deniable means should take place out of the public view, but it could be an important element in gaining time and making an Iranian compromise more likely.

The problem is that Tehran does not believe the United States and Israel will use all means available to prevent Iran from getting close to having a nuclear weapon. As a result, Washington and Israel must find better ways to demonstrate that they mean what they say—in other words, that they are prepared to take military action if needed.⁴ The United States and Israel should share their thoughts on how to change the Iranian leaders' perception on this issue. Not only does Israel potentially have useful ideas on this matter but the consultation and the resulting actions will have the added advantage for Washington of reassuring Israel and therefore reducing the prospect Israel will feel compelled to act on its own—even as the U.S. and P5+1 focus should always be on stopping Iran's nuclear progress, not on preventing an Israeli strike.

Iran needs to believe there is a credible threat of force coming from the United States. The United States wants to solve this issue politically if possible, but as President Obama has said, the

4. Analysis of measures to this end appears in Michael Eisenstadt, *Not by Sanctions Alone: Using Intelligence and Military Means to Bolster Diplomacy with Iran*, PolicyWatch 1961 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 28, 2012), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/not-by-sanctions-alone-using-intelligence-and-military-means-to-bolster-dip>.

United States will use all elements of its power to ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon. It would behoove the president to elaborate upon this point. His statement could be reinforced by explaining how the United States has increased its presence and exercises in the Gulf and increased its provision of missile defense to allies in the Gulf and elsewhere. To reinforce the point so that neither Iran nor Israel misses the signal, it would be useful if Obama would repeat often his earlier statements that the U.S. window for diplomacy is closing. He can say what has been said by his advisors: at a certain point in late 2013, the United States will no longer be able to vouch that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon.⁵ In short, the U.S. timetable is finite and not open-ended. This would be a clear signal to Israel that U.S. decisionmaking on Iran is not open-ended as Israel fears, but that a decision will come shortly in the event that the combination of economic sanctions and diplomacy fails.

A renewed discussion within the P5+1 on what happens after the diplomacy window closes could further influence Iran to understand it will not be able to possess a nuclear weapon. In such a discussion, Washington should clarify that it is not afraid of talks failing, that it has begun planning for just such an eventuality, and that the United States is interested in the outcome of talks rather than just the process. It is unclear whether Iran will believe an “or else” exists, but U.S. interests dictate that the other P5+1 governments should understand clearly the consequences of continued Iranian nuclear progress even if Tehran does not.

A candid bilateral discussion on how the United States could, in principle, help make a unilateral Israeli strike more successful would also have much merit, with the clear understanding that U.S.

help would expand along with Israel’s willingness to postpone a strike that the United States deems premature. U.S. assistance in this regard could go beyond military equipment such as spare parts and military backup such as missile defense to include diplomatic support on the regional and world stage. According to this thinking, Israel would be better armed to strike Iran but would delay such a strike until 2013, when economic sanctions and diplomacy will have a chance for greater success and the U.S.-Israel talks on a possible strike could be intensified. This approach would give Israel a sense that delay does not mean forgoing Israel’s ability to act independently and would signal to Iran that the United States is not chained to diplomacy and is serious about stopping Iran’s nuclear program.

The U.S.-Israel dialogue could also encompass the matter of which state would be more effective in engaging in a strike. Such a dialogue would help reassure Israel that the United States is prepared to act if necessary as well as hone each party’s contingency plans. Questions in such a discussion might include:

- Which state is more likely to succeed?
- Which state can provide more time to exhaust the other options?
- Which state would be seen as a more legitimate source of a strike by the international community?
- What will be the effect in the Middle East following an attack?
- Which prospective attack will avoid crossing the skies of a third country?
- Which state is better equipped to mount a one-night “light and quick” strike?
- Which state could draw a more limited retaliation from Iran?

While a spot assessment shows the United States to be the answer on some of these questions and Israel on others, a closer reading is needed before drawing any definitive conclusions.

5. James Risen and Mark Mazzetti, “U.S. Agencies See No Move by Iran to Build a Bomb,” *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/us-agencies-see-no-move-by-iran-to-build-a-bomb.html>.

4 | DEFINING THE NATURE OF A DIPLOMATIC AGREEMENT

FOR THE UNITED STATES to form a broad consensus with key allies—including but certainly not limited to Israel—about a diplomatic agreement, consultation will be required on two key questions: negotiating strategy and the content of an agreement.

NEGOTIATING STRATEGY

Thus far, the P5+1 has pursued a strategy based on confidence-building measures (CBMs) aimed at alleviating a history of mistrust between the two sides and a shared feeling that neither will fulfill its commitments. In principle, CBMs can provide intermediate reassurance on the path to a fuller deal, as well as testing just how far each side is prepared to go. According to this model, the more Iran is willing to do, the more the P5+1 will do in return. An interim goal in the CBM process is to stop the clock—that is, prevent Iran from entering the “zone of immunity,” at which point Israel judges it no longer has the option of inflicting grave damage on Iran’s nuclear program in the event of a diplomatic impasse. It is in Iran’s interest, as well as that of the international community, not to force Israel to make a premature decision about whether to strike Iran.

In practice, the current focus on CBMs runs several risks. One is that an interim agreement with Iran could become the *de facto* final deal, with protracted negotiations representing the only additional “achievement.” Any interim deal would cover only the most urgent issues, leaving Iran free to pursue many other problematic nuclear activities. In addition, once an interim agreement is in place, arguing for a more comprehensive deal in 2013 or 2014—that is, arguing that the initial deal was only a stopgap—will become a greater challenge.

Focus by the P5+1 on a stopgap measure holds the additional risk of squandering the leverage gained by the international community through its

unprecedented sanctions against Iran, which will certainly insist on some sanctions relief in return for any concessions it makes. Such relief, as hinted earlier, would reduce the likelihood of intensified international political and economic pressure in the future. If Iran is under less pressure, it is hard to see why Tehran would be more amenable to making additional concessions. In other words, an interim agreement could make a second-phase comprehensive agreement less, rather than more, likely.

In addition, pursuit of an interim agreement could create a dynamic in which the P5+1 lowers its demands. As Netanyahu remonstrated this past spring,

One would expect that the powers demand that Iran stop all enrichment in light of its serial violations and in light of the fact that they are currently enriching at a level of 20%, but instead they are reducing their demands. In the first round, the [P5+1] demanded that the Iranians stop the 3.5% [enrichment], and even that is not happening now. In this round, they are not even insisting that the Iranians stop all enrichment.¹

Israel, for its part, believes interim steps are essentially useless and that all core demands should be pursued in a deal, whether it is termed “interim” or “comprehensive.” Otherwise, in Israel’s view, Iran will simply be allowed to run out the clock on its way to a nuclear weapon.

One way, perhaps, to convince Israel that any interim agreement is indeed insufficient and temporary is to place an expiration date on it, marking the deal explicitly as a stepping-stone to a comprehensive deal.

1. Netanyahu, address to the INSS Conference on Security Challenges, May 29, 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches%20by%20Israeli%20leaders/2012/PM_Netanyahu_addresses_INSS_Conference_29-May-2012.htm.

All of which leads to the prospect of a comprehensive agreement—which itself carries risks. In particular, Iran could agree to a deal in principle and then stretch out the talks for years while it continues to make progress toward a bomb, all the while accusing the P5+1 of being the party preventing the deal from going through—a tactic of which some have accused the North Koreans. Thus, the road to a comprehensive deal must be paired with the immediate need to halt Iran’s progress.

As it happens, the two sides have vastly different conceptions of what a full deal would entail, making such an outcome unlikely in the short term. Certainly, the scenario laid out by Iran in its July 3 proposal is far from anything the P5+1 could accept. Iran explicitly refuses the P5+1’s “stop, shut, and ship out” proposal regarding enriched uranium and makes no mention of increased safeguards such as the Additional Protocol, while demanding that all unilateral and multilateral sanctions be lifted.² Under these circumstances, an interim agreement itself would likely be counterproductive.

One set of incentives by the P5+1 that might interest Iran in a deal to stop the clock would be an offer of civil nuclear power capability and advanced nuclear research capabilities. To that end, the P5+1 offer should spell out clearly a wide range of nuclear facilities and technologies with which the negotiators stand ready to help Iran, including energy production, medical treatment, and scientific research. The more details provided, the more convincing the offer will be, at least in the eyes of the world, if not in those of Iran’s negotiating team members.

An offer of nuclear power and research capabilities might also play into a final-status offer, which could include considerable sanctions relief for Iran. Yet, as noted, the final-status game is not

without dangers. If, for example, terms of a proposed offer were leaked, the negotiators might be judged according to the established terms at home. In Iran’s case, the July 3 proposal set a standard that will allow critics to pounce should Iran’s negotiators retreat from their initial position. Such a warning is particularly apt given the vicious infighting in Iran’s political scene. Risks for the P5+1 include a scenario in which Iran pockets any concessions, only to demand more while failing to hold up its end of the deal. In that way, the proposal might erode the P5+1’s bargaining position while doing little if anything to make Iran more amenable to an agreement.

Despite the risks, a final-status offer would hold diplomatic advantages. To begin with, a public commitment by the P5+1 to a firm set of goals would reassure Israel regarding the negotiators’ intentions. As discussed earlier, Israel is much more interested in determining the end-state of Iran’s nuclear program than in stopping the clock, because the latter scenario, in their view, would entail the cost of easing pressure on Iran while Israel’s ability to strike against that program will be eliminated fairly soon. And if Iran agreed to a comprehensive commitment on the nuclear impasse, Israel probably would not object to a phased implementation of the deal—although a sharp distinction must be drawn between a phased implementation and a gradualist, open-ended approach that starts with modest CBMs and gives no guarantee about what steps will follow.

As noted earlier, should negotiations reach deadlock—whether aimed at an interim or a final-status deal—the United States must convince the world of the need for more forceful action. In arguing that the United States has been the reasonable party, it must adopt a two-pronged approach: an attractive U.S. offer as part of the P5+1 process and an effective countering of Iran’s propaganda, which is sure to claim Iranian rights are being violated. Absurd as these claims may be in reality, many will consider them plausible, and the claims will need to be answered. The preposterous statement of a “right to

2. The proposed four-step process includes “terminat[ing] all unilateral and multilateral sanctions (out[side] of the UNSC framework)” in step two and ending the UN Security Council sanctions in step three. The document’s section “reviewing and assessing the proposal of P5+1” focuses almost entirely on why Iran cannot agree to close the Fordow enrichment facility or cease producing 20 percent enriched uranium.

enrichment”—divorced from the NPT obligations of transparency—should be contested, even if such a response infuriates Iran’s negotiating team. U.S. strategy for the negotiations must be shaped by a prospective world reaction, not just Iran’s reaction.

The P5+1 should offer a final-status agreement to clarify what is at stake—both incentives for Iran and Iran’s level of interest in resolving the underlying impasse. The hope would be that the final-status offer would advance negotiations, but even if not, such an offer would lay the basis for more direct steps if Iran refused to engage seriously.

CONTENT OF AN AGREEMENT

The intensive focus on centrifuges in a potential agreement has occurred to the neglect of other important issues, including compliance, uranium stocks, sites, and reprocessing. Should these latter issues receive inadequate attention, then even excellent provisions on the centrifuges would make a deal counterproductive. Moreover, if these seemingly secondary issues receive sufficient attention, then key audiences, including America’s Middle East allies, could be satisfied, even if they were less happy about a deal’s terms regarding the centrifuges. Finally, a conversation with allies that considers only centrifuges is less likely to result in a consensus, in addition to reducing the prospects for an agreement with Iran that moves the country further away from a nuclear weapons capability. Here’s how a discussion could play out on each of the key issues, including the centrifuges:

COMPLIANCE. An agreement is worse than useless if Iran does not comply fully with its terms, because the deal then becomes a barrier to necessary action by the West and its partners. Given Iran’s past undeclared activities, a particular concern is that Iran will develop clandestine nuclear facilities. Tehran’s coming clean about the past will therefore be an important determinant of whether it has any hidden capabilities. Iran’s regular discussions with the United States on its past chemical

weapons activities, as documented by WikiLeaks,³ provide a model for similar talks on nuclear activities: they include detailed, specific, and official answers to questions posed by the United States as well as by the relevant international agency. In addition to coming clean about the past, Iran will need to restore the access that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors had in 2004–2005 to industrial facilities and records connected to the production of centrifuges—access that was an important means of monitoring whether Iran was clandestinely producing more centrifuges than in the declared program.

A further concern on compliance involves the possibility that Iran will unilaterally renounce its obligations, as it has done with the revised Safeguards Agreement, even though modification of the provision required mutual agreement between Iran and the IAEA.⁴ Any deal’s credibility will thus be bolstered by explicit provisions preventing Iran’s withdrawal in the event of unanswered IAEA questions about Iran’s activities; should Iran withdraw after those questions were answered, it would then be required to surrender or destroy any foreign technology or equipment to which it has access. Shoring up the credibility of any agreement further would be a statement by outside powers that Iranian noncompliance with the deal’s provisions would result in the right of the signatories to destroy facilities to which Iran blocks access.

Both to fit Iran’s preferences and to benefit the global nonproliferation regime, the negotiators should frame the elements of any agreement with Iran as refinements to the existing nonproliferation

3. A remarkable 2004 exchange of official letters between Iranian ambassador to the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Hossein Panahi Azar and U.S. ambassador to OPCW Eric Javits describes the formal meetings between the two governments aimed at answering U.S. questions about Iran’s past chemical weapons programs. See <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=17057>.
4. The revised Safeguards Agreement requires Iran to provide information similar to that required by the Additional Protocol, including notifying the IAEA about any nuclear facility by the time construction begins rather than shortly before nuclear material is introduced into the facility.

standards applicable to all NPT members. This approach will pertain especially in the area of intrusive verification. This means that Iran, like all NPT signatories, must be subjected to updated technology in tracking, filming, and monitoring of its enrichment activities. Twenty years ago, after Iraq's clandestine nuclear activities were discovered, the IAEA adopted an enhanced set of surveillance procedures that were embedded in the Additional Protocol. The IAEA procedures must be updated once again and, preferably, enshrined in another protocol.

REPROCESSING. Placing strict limits on uranium enrichment as a route to the bomb will be of little use if Iran responds by emulating North Korea and taking the plutonium route. Steps to block such a path must encompass Iran's Arak reactor, now under construction. Yet rather than insisting that construction be stopped, the P5+1 can offer Iran a face-saving compromise that allows it to claim victory in its pursuit of advanced nuclear technology—that is, offer to complete Arak in a way that makes it much less of a proliferation concern, an effort that may, in effect, require abandoning the current project and building a new, more modest facility. The return to Russia of spent fuel from the Bushehr reactor would constitute another step toward alleviating reprocessing concerns, along with a firm ban on any reprocessing itself.

ENRICHED URANIUM STOCKS. Iran's breakout capability rests on two components: its centrifuges and its stocks of enriched uranium, especially the more highly enriched stocks. So reducing those stocks constitutes an important way to weaken the breakout capability. Any enriched uranium produced in Iran, the negotiators could determine, would leave the country, to return only in the form of fuel rods or fuel plates, which are extremely difficult to convert into bomb material (though, of course, Iran would also be free to sell the enriched uranium to another NPT signatory). Shipping out

the more highly enriched uranium (at 20 percent) will considerably slow the clock, but stopping the clock completely will require that all enriched uranium be shipped out. After all, by making 3.5 percent enriched uranium, Iran has done 70 percent of the separative work needed to produce bomb-grade uranium, explaining why possession of a stock of 3.5 percent enriched uranium leaves Iran considerably closer to bomb-grade uranium. Today, Iran has six tons of enriched uranium at various levels: reducing those stocks to zero or even several hundred kilograms (plus the difficult-to-convert rods and plates) would move Iran quite a bit further from bomb-production capability.⁵

SITES. The more sites at which Iran conducts nuclear activities, the closer the monitoring should be. On this count, the construction of a facility at Fordow and the late declaration of this activity to the IAEA should incur a price for Iran, to entail limitation of activities at Fordow en route to complete deactivation (or conversion to a research facility) as well as a firm and immediate ban on construction of additional sites. Such a tough stance would have the added benefit of assuaging Israel's concerns that increased capabilities at Fordow bring Iran closer to a zone of immunity. Any deal should limit enrichment to the Natanz facility only.

CENTRIFUGES. Approaches to Iran's enrichment could take many forms, among them a limit on the level of enrichment (e.g., nothing above 3.5 percent)

5. Natural uranium has seven U-235 atoms for every 993 U-238 atoms. To get to 3.5 percent enriched uranium (that is, seven U-235 atoms and 193 U-238 atoms), 800 U-238 atoms must be removed. To then get to 93 percent enriched uranium (that is, seven U-235 atoms and one U-238 atom), a further 192 U-238 atoms must be removed. The first step, removing 800 atoms, involves 81 percent of the total 992 atoms that must be removed. The work involved to remove each atom is not completely identical, so the 3.5 percent stage is about 70 percent of the total effort required. The first step, removing 800 atoms, involves 81 percent of the total 992 atoms that must be removed. The work involved to remove each atom is not completely identical, so the 3.5 percent stage is about 70 percent of the total effort required.

and the number of centrifuges. Another approach would be to have Iran transfer its enrichment facilities to the territory of another NPT signatory. This move could occur in the context of a fleshed-out guarantee by the international community to allow NPT members access to enriched uranium, thereby expanding the international fuel bank and increasing commitments on market availability.

A call for limits on enrichment, to be sure, would encounter stiff resistance. Ayatollah Khomeini seems so dug in on the issue that he has reportedly said he “would resign if for any reason Iran is deprived of its rights to enrichment.”⁶ Furthermore, complete and permanent cessation of enrichment has not been the position of the international community. The Security Council resolutions call only for suspension until Iran has restored confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of its nuclear program.⁷ Nor have any of the P5+1 members publicly called for complete and permanent cessation, much as that may be their preference. Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that the United States would not object to Iran resuming enrichment under some circumstances. So, as desirable as full cessation might be from a nonproliferation

point of view, such an outcome does not seem to be the most likely.⁸

Given the obstacles negotiators will likely face in pressing limits on enrichment, they might consider an old trick for reviving hung-up talks: change the question. And in changing the question, they must remember that the ultimate goal of the negotiations is to push Iran farther away from a nuclear weapons capability and that reducing enrichment is a means to that end. Although the 2010 Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) deal was aborted, its focus on limiting the amount of enriched uranium in Iran, rather than on centrifuges, can prove instructive. If Iran were to agree to ship out of the country any enriched uranium as soon as it was made, such a step would arguably address Western objectives almost as well as if Iran destroyed its present centrifuges but retained the knowledge and facilities to make centrifuges as it desired. This, or any similar approach that moves Iran away from nuclear weapons capability, could be the basis for a deal.

INCENTIVES FOR IRAN

When it comes to carrots, the United States and Europe will first want clear evidence of Tehran’s commitment to a deal before offering any rewards, an approach that issues from the regime’s spotty record of implementation and quick suspension of past agreements. America’s friends in the Middle East, including those in the GCC, will be concerned in particular that the P5+1 maintain a strong position to continue pressing Iran for steps beyond an interim agreement that more fully address their concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. On such issues, the United States sees eye-to-eye with its Middle East friends.

6. Seyyed Hossein Moussavian, a onetime spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team, writes on page 440 of his book *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012) that “I will never forget Dr. [Hassan] Rouhani” telling me that Khomeini had said this to Rouhani in 2004. Rouhani was then Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator.

7. UN Security Council Resolution 1736, adopted December 23, 2006, has as its first two operative paragraphs: “1. Affirms that Iran shall without further delay take the steps required by the IAEA Board of Governors in its resolution GOV/2006/14, which are essential to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of its nuclear programme and to resolve outstanding questions; 2. Decides, in this context, that Iran shall without further delay suspend the following proliferation sensitive nuclear activities: (a) all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, to be verified by the IAEA; and (b) work on all heavy water-related projects, including the construction of a research reactor moderated by heavy water, also to be verified by the IAEA.” The resolution makes no mention of the conditions under which the suspension is to end.

8. In March 2011, Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee: “It has been our position that under very strict conditions Iran would, sometime in the future, having responded to the international community’s concerns and irreversibly shut down its nuclear weapons program, have such a right [to enrich] under IAEA inspections.” The context is analyzed in Peter Crail, “U.S. Positions on Iran Enrichment: More Public Recognition than Policy Shift,” *Arms Control Today*, April 2012.

Another concern related to incentives for Iran involves the perception that the P5+1 could make geopolitical concessions in a grand bargain with Tehran. To a degree that may surprise many U.S. policymakers, especially those new to the issue, GCC elites remain wary of a possible deal that honors Iran's regional importance and restores U.S.-Iran cooperation at the expense of the Gulf states, calling to mind the American relationship with the shah—a relationship that GCC leaders feel harmed their interests profoundly. Although the United States could never establish a relationship with the Islamic Republic that resembles that of the prerevolutionary days, Washington

and its P5+1 partners should keep the GCC states apprised of their aims and the status of negotiations. Such consultation will go a long way toward easing GCC fears. The GCC countries should also be encouraged to raise their own worries, to be discussed in negotiations, such as safety concerns with respect to Bushehr, an issue that should be folded into a nuclear agreement.

On the Israeli front, concerns surround the possibility that a deal could include language describing the Middle East as a WMD-free zone. Historically, however, Washington has closely coordinated its position on such matters with Israel. Such coordination will continue to be necessary.

5 | A FINAL WORD

IN DIPLOMACY, negotiators often struggle to admit that the process has failed. They continue to believe in the process even when hard gains cannot be discerned. In the Iran talks, increased time pressure has now become necessary as it relates to all parties: for the Americans and their P5+1 partners, so that they are not seen as providing tacit acquiescence to Iran's march to a nuclear weapon, an outcome that would profoundly corrode U.S. prestige; and for Iran, so that the regime knows that consequences for continued nuclear activities will be dire. At some point soon, the talks must show progress, or the window for diplomacy will indeed have closed, and the United States—along with as many international partners as it can mobilize—should move to more forceful action, be it covert or overt, publicly proclaimed or deniable.

Continued talks without any obvious result will also be perceived by observers as an attempt to preempt the Israeli use of force. But, as discussed earlier, such foot-dragging will increase the likelihood of an Israeli strike. Recognizing this reality, the U.S. government may decide that in the absence of diplomatic progress the best alternative is to create conditions under which Israel will attack, rather than to accept that the talks have failed; after all, failed talks would lead to much debate about whether the United States must act overtly and directly against Iran's nuclear program. But such an approach would amount to placing quite a heavy burden on a small U.S. ally. Other countries relying on U.S. security would have to draw lessons about how much value to place in their U.S. security guarantees.

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