

Failed Framework on Iran

The Iran nuclear-agreement “framework” has been meticulously dissected and it appears that the United States, in order not to fumble completely through another deadline, agreed to fuzzy wording that claims progress and leaves a great deal of important precision unsettled and still to be argued about, aiming for completion in another three months, by June 30. The capable French and German foreign ministers, Laurent Fabius and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, had already departed the conference site of Lausanne and were summoned back to help legitimize the ostensible progress. The Chinese and Russians have said nothing about these talks, though they have participated in them, and the British, whose government will be reviewed in what is shaping up as a very dodgy election on May 7, have generally adhered to the American line as it has steadily accommodated Iran’s demands to retain its nuclear program (though it continues to insist that nuclear weapons are not its objective). There is no agreed statement from the seven countries in the talks and the only agreed statement, from Iran and the European Union representative, was very vague and differed in several respects with the publicly stated American position.

To the extent that President Obama was just cooperating something together to keep the talks going and avoid the renewed embarrassment of the absence of an agreement although the sides have been kicking every aspect of the subject around for years, that could be fairly innocuous. If these discussions could lead to a useful agreement, there is no reason to end them on a premature deadline. If, however, as the president’s critics assert, and it is hard not to think they may well be right, the administration is just papering over chasms of unbridgeable disagreement, it invites concern that the gradual American-led retreat will continue to a seriously unacceptable agreement. The choice of the word

“reduce” in reference to the stockpile of low-enriched uranium incites the inference that, instead of shipping the stockpile out of Iran as has always been demanded by the Americans, it is proposed that Iran retain possession of it but downgrade it, an easily and quickly reversible process and an interpretation that provides no security for those militating against an Iranian nuclear capability. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken was specifically ambiguous on this subject.

The fortified underground nuclear-development facility at Fordow, Iran, which President Obama referred to in sinister terms in December 2013 (“They don’t need an underground, fortified facility . . . in order to have a peaceful program”), will be “used for peaceful purposes only.” There is natural concern about the definition and verifiability of “peaceful purposes,” and little likelihood that Iran will be motivated to cooperate in setting foreign minds at ease on the point. Nor is there any assurance of what will happen after the 15-year period envisioned for the agreement has elapsed. An equal mystery enshrouds how Iran will carry out its promise to “redesign and rebuild” the heavy-water reactor in Arak so that “it will not produce weapons-grade plutonium,” and how this will be verified.

The framework agreement, as described by the U.S. State Department, commits Iran to “implement an agreed set of measures to address the International Atomic Energy Agency’s concerns regarding the Possible Military Dimensions of its program.” Possible Military Dimensions is the official description of a complete audit of Iran’s past weaponization initiatives; Iran has comprehensively stonewalled the IAEA up to now, and there is no reason to believe that it will change this policy. The State Department summary implies that Iran will be given the benefit of the doubt and not intensively monitored. No sane person could attach the slightest credence to any such approach.

The framework agreement, according to the State Department, has promised regular access to all of Iran's nuclear facilities and has promised to accept the IAEA Additional Protocol of regulations and inspections to ensure that an illicit nuclear program is not under way. But the Iran-EU joint statement refers only to "a provisional application of the Additional Protocol." This obviously requires clarification, but the Iranian refusal to contemplate such a step up to now is not reassuring and the trend of these talks has been entirely one of preemptive concessions by the six powers (U.S., U.K., France, Germany, China, Russia). Iran signed the Additional Protocol in 2003, but has not cooperated at all on this subject for eleven years. The phrase "regular access" also raises concerns: If inspection visits are pre-scheduled and not over-frequent, activities can be discontinued and restarted to evade detection. President Obama's assurance in his telecast last week that "this deal is not based on trust [but] on unprecedented verification," even if accurate, means only greater verification than the zero oversight Iran has tolerated up to now.

Almost all the restrictions and pauses envisioned in the framework agreement are for ten or 15 years, and there is no pretense that they will be continued after that. There is a further worrisome disparity between the State Department announcement that the remaining U.S.-EU economic sanctions on Iran will be removed when the IAEA confirms that all the demilitarization steps described have been taken and the Iran-EU statement that the sanctions will be removed "while" Iran complies (not to mention the fact that Secretary of State John Kerry's statement that the withdrawal of sanctions would be "phased" was disputed by Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif). There is also a difference on when United Nations sanctions on Iran will be ended: Iran-EU says when the Security Council votes to remove them, and the State Department says that those sanctions, too, will be lifted when Iran has completed compliance. There is no mention of U.S.

sanctions on Iran for terrorism, human-rights violations, and ballistic-missile development, and there is naturally no reference to the imbroglio between the administration and the Republican-led Congress about how the United States approves a final agreement.

If all the questions were resolved satisfactorily for the American side, the deal would still do nothing to curb irresponsible Iranian behavior in the region and would pose no obstacle to Iranian completion of a military nuclear capability in ten to 15 years. Nothing is really being destroyed or, apparently, shipped out of Iran; just mothballed, assumedly for future reactivation. This is less than three years after President Obama said that "the deal we will accept is that [the Iranians] end their nuclear program and abide by the U.N. resolutions that have been in place," and it constitutes an inexplicable retreat from where he and then-Secretary of State Clinton started. There is no enforcement mechanism; no one believes that sanctions will be generally reimposed if Iran violates a signed agreement, and no one of sound mind could have any confidence that Iran will prove trustworthy, any more than North Korea and even the Soviet Union generally did.

It is discouraging that President Obama is so desperate for a deal, and so frequently untruthful about his tactics in negotiating one. He apparently thinks that his Iran policy is a strategic breakthrough on the scale of the Nixon opening to China, which is almost unimaginably self-inflated and absurd. He claims to want "robust debate" but endlessly says that the only alternative to this agreement, no matter how Iran rewrites it between now and June 30, is war, yet he still piously repeats from time to time, although no one in the world believes him, that "all options are on the table" if Iran doesn't come to the party. In one of the most fawning, boot-licking presidential interviews in history, Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* was encouraged on the weekend to credit

him with an Obama Doctrine (a doctrine like those established by James Monroe, Henry Stimson, Harry Truman, and Richard Nixon) that consists of "engaging" with former foes, including Burma, Cuba, and Iran, while retaining a large military. This administration had nothing to do with the partial loosening of the military dictatorship in Burma, the Cuba policy was neither significant nor innovative (and it remains to be seen whether that accommodation accomplishes anything useful), and Iran has just been a series of unrequited American concessions while Iran takes over much of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen and exerts an entirely negative influence of the Palestinians. The Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians, and now even the Turks and Pakistanis are as appalled by the appeasement of Iran by Washington as Israel is.

In his interview, Obama again apologized for the American role in overthrowing the Mossadegh "democracy" in 1953, and helping to maintain the Shah. (Mossadegh was a lunatic and not much of a democrat and the Shah gave Iran the best government it has had and was the most reliable ally the United States had in the region.) He also claimed that public opinion matters in Iran, having forgotten his craven lack of support for the majority of Iranians that was robbed in the 2009 election in that country.

The United States would do better to give unconditional defensive military guarantees to Israel and a couple of other Middle Eastern countries, take a hard line on the construction of this unpromising framework, and collaborate with Netanyahu's saber-rattling, warning the Iranians that if they don't deliver on the interpretation of the framework, it will be impossible to restrain Israel and its newly self-discovered Muslim allies from reprisals against Iran on a scale that only the Middle East can generate. The best outcome now conceivable, apart from Israel blasting the nuclear sites with tacit encouragement from most of the other countries in the region, would be for Obama to keep kicking this can down the

road, three months at a time, until his successor is inaugurated.

But, even if he suddenly roused himself from his delusional torpor and started sounding purposeful, Obama has no credibility. The Iranians would have to be excused for thinking it was just another “red line” fiasco. He is obviously determined to agree to whatever Tehran deigns to give him, and claim the constitutional right to make the agreement, even though the majority of the Congress, but probably not an insuperable majority, will oppose it. This could conceivably get us to Inauguration Day 2017, without Iran’s having yet transformed itself into a nuclear-garrison theocracy, though probably with only a few months to spare. Whoever the next president is will have had plenty of time to think of what to do about Iran, and will enter office with the restored credibility of that great office, unencumbered by the years of preemptive, failed “reset” concessions that have tumbled out of this administration in all directions since the unspeakable confection of historical falsehoods this president inflicted on his audience at Cairo University in 2009.

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