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Topic 9

The Iran Deal and America: A Tale of Two Nations

Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, fears over nuclear proliferation have not been at the forefront of the American consciousness. Almost no countries have attempted to create their own arsenal of nuclear weapons. That is, with a couple exceptions: North Korea and Iran. North Korea is a totalitarian hermit state, aggressive and obsessed with military strength. Their determination to achieve a nuclear weapon is not so surprising. Iran, however, is a stable democracy—an economic powerhouse with a large population. Its desire to create a nuclear weapon is a bit more surprising at a first glance. Yet for years they have developed a nuclear program, leading to unease among the international community. The consequences of an Iranian nuclear weapon would stretch far beyond the nation’s borders, potentially leading to a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation throughout the region and the world. Iran choosing whether or not to give up its nuclear weapons program has massive implications for the preservation of peace the world over. This paper will cover the history behind the Iranian nuclear program, the diplomacy surrounding it, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action created as a compromise between Iran and the several world powers.

A Brief History

The mistrust between Iran and the west (and the United States in particular) stretches back decades to the 1950s, when the United States and United Kingdom helped orchestrate a coup to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister. The United States then supported the unpopular Shah for decades until, in 1979, he was overthrown by the Iranian revolution. During the revolution, the American embassy in Tehran was raided and dozens of Americans were taken hostage for well over a year. In 1988, an American warship shot down an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 people. In 2002, President Bush denounces Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil.” More recently, in 2019, Iran shot down an American drone while Americans blame Iran for explosions on six oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman (BBC 2019). Needless to say, the relationship between the two powers has been strained.

Iran is a Shia Muslim country that is surrounded on nearly all sides by Sunni powers, many of whom are backed by the United States. It fought a brutal war in the 1980s against its neighbor, Iraq, losing hundreds of thousands of lives in the process. Of note is the Western support for Iraq in this conflict. Iran also views Israel as an adversary in the region, refusing to even acknowledge its existence. This hostile environment has led many Iranians to view their country primarily through the lens of its military strength, leading to a desire for projection of strength, whether from nuclear or conventional forces. Iran is perhaps the most important state sponsor of terrorism throughout the region, against Sunni, Israeli, and American interests alike. All of this is quite interesting from a stable, albeit devoutly religious, democracy—a nation with a large middle class and an educated population. Why, then, would Iran so desperately want to develop a nuclear weapon? One theory is that they desire the international respect that such weapons would bring. The United States is far more careful when dealing with countries like North Korea and Pakistan than Iran. Many Iranians believe that, with a nuclear weapon, they will no longer be pushed around by the West and be able to exert themselves permanently as regional hegemon (Tarzi).

Iran has had experience with nuclear technology long before the Shah was overthrown in 1979. As a part of Atoms for Peace, the United States assisted Iran in developing a peaceful nuclear energy program. By the time of the revolution, Iran had developed impressive baseline capabilities in nuclear technologies. After the revolution, US support disappeared and many of the nuclear scientists fled, but Iranian interest in a nuclear program remained. After the Iran-Iraq War, Iran signed nuclear cooperation agreements with Pakistan, Russia, and China, accelerating their progress in nuclear technology. The United States had long been suspicious that Iran was using its civilian nuclear program as a cover for developing nuclear weapons, leading the US to pressure suppliers to limit cooperation with Iran. In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran uncovered the existence of multiple undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities, leading to considerable suspicion and worry in the international community. In 2003, the International Atomic Energy Agency conducted inspections of nuclear facilities in Iran and met with officials to better understand the Iranian nuclear program (Nuclear Threat Initiative). Later that year, Iran, much to the delight of the IAEA, signed the Additional Protocol—a document granting IAEA some inspection authority at Iranian nuclear facilities. Iran signed the Protocol under the threat of being referred to the UN Security Council. The Protocol allowed for the IAEA expanded rights of access and authority to use cutting edge technology to verify the legality of the nuclear program (Nuclear Threat Initiative).

Despite the agreement, tensions were still rising. While Iran signed an agreement to temporarily suspend enrichment activities, it took advantage of ambiguities in the agreement to continue producing centrifuge parts and carry out experiments. Faced with sanctions for these actions, Iran signed the Paris Agreement in November 2004, which suspended all manufacture, instillation, testing, and operation of centrifuges in Iran (Director General). The US agreed to support the deal so long as the European powers that signed it would endorse referring Iran to the UN Security Council should they violate the terms of the agreement. That same month, the CIA received documents indicating that Iran was modifying missiles to carry a nuclear warhead. The IAEA also found that Iran was hiding blueprints for a more advanced centrifuge. While Iranian officials denounced the documents as forgeries, the trust between parties had still been damaged. Iran was also not cooperating fully with the IAEA in disclosing the sources of its centrifuges (Nuclear Threat Initiative).

The Iranians had repeatedly insisted that their nuclear program was for strictly peaceful purposes only, but that became more difficult for the major world powers to believe after Iran continually pushed the boundaries of what was allowed and refused to disclose important information regarding their nuclear program. In 2005, talks faltered as the E-3 (Great Britain, France, Germany) and the United states insisted that Iran cease all enrichment activities while Iran declared that it had a right as a sovereign nation to an enrichment program. In 2006, Iran broke the IAEA agreement at multiple facilities and began research with its centrifuge program. Shortly afterwards, they announced that they successfully enriched uranium to energy grade and that they would no longer comply with the Additional Protocol or any other agreements with the IAEA, leading Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council. While Russia and China opposed sanctions on Iran, the United States, along with the rest of the security council, plus Germany, leveled a series of “inducements” on Iran, with suspension of enrichment as a precondition for any negotiations. At this point, the United States dropped its insistence that Iran stop all enrichment permanently. This led to a September 2006 agreement with the European powers that Iran would pause enrichment and enter directly into negotiations with the United States, though these failed because the Supreme Leader of Iran felt that he would be giving up too much. The failure to make a deal resulted in the UN Security Council leveling sanctions on Iran, specifically financial sanctions on entities tied to the nuclear program. In 2007, the National Intelligence Estimate reported that, while Iran had a nuclear weapons program up until 2003, it was likely discontinued, setting back the Bush administration’s efforts to tighten sanctions on Iran (Reardon).

In 2008, new evidence of a weapons program surfaced, and international sanctions tightened. For the first time, a U.S. representative attended talks to alleviate these tensions. However, these talks made little progress as both the President and Supreme Leader of Iran refused to give ground. When President Obama first took office, he signaled that making a nuclear deal with Iran would be a top priority, even leaving military action against nuclear facilities on the table. Adding additional pressure to Iran, in 2009, the US unilaterally imposed “crippling sanctions” and revealed multiple uranium enrichment sites that had previously been kept secret (Reardon). This led to talks on a fuel-swap deal which eventually fell apart as the Supreme Leader of Iran took the side of hardliners critiquing the deal. Afterwards, Iran announced that it would further enrich some of its uranium to medical grade—far closer to obtaining a nuclear weapon (Cowell). Little changed in the relationship until late 2011, when the US tightened sanctions even further, leading Iran to threaten closing the Strait of Hormuz—a critical oil shipping hub. At this point, tensions were at a peak with neither side showing any sign of relenting.

In 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected president of Iran and, in his inaugural address, signaled that he was willing to negotiate with the United States on the nuclear program. Starting in early 2013, talks between US and Iran commenced in Oman, laying out a basic framework for a deal. Later that year, Iran met with he P5+1 in Geneva to further negotiate a deal and, in November 2013, the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) was announced. The JPOA set a tentative framework for agreement and deadlines for a more comprehensive agreement (Nuclear Threat Initiative). This led to the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement that exchanges oversight and limited nuclear capabilities for Iran with lifting of sanctions by the US and other nations. While the agreement was quite unpopular among hardliners both in the US and Iran, the deal passed through legislatures both in Iran and the United States. Soon after, the UN Security Council endorsed the deal (Nuclear Threat Initiative).

Details of the JCPOA

The JCPOA lays out many restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program. President Obama claims that it “cuts off any path” for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. There are three primary ways that it does this. First, it forces Iran to reduce its uranium deposits by 97%, a reduction from about 10,000 kg to just 300 kg. What uranium is left must be enriched to no more than 3.67%. For perspective, medical and research grade uranium is enriched to about 20% and weapons grade uranium is enriched to about 90%. Second, under the agreement, Iran must reduce its number of centrifuges from about 20,000 to a little over 6,000. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the agreement allows IAEA inspectors unprecedented access to monitor Iran’s nuclear program at every stage. These stages include mining and milling, conversion, enrichment, fuel manufacturing, nuclear reactors, and fuel disposal. Prior to the deal, Iran had the capability to produce eight to ten nuclear bombs in a matter of two to three months. Under the terms of the deal, if Iran chose to break the agreement, it would take the country well over a year to create a single nuclear weapon (Iran Deal).

Under the agreement, Iran is bound to the 300kg uranium limit until 2031, research and development is highly limited and only allowed in one location until 2024, and Iran can build no heavy-water reactors until 2031. Additionally, until 2031, Iran will have 24 days to comply with any access request from the IAEA to remain in compliance with the agreement. Due to the radioactive nature of uranium, if Iran were to break the terms of the agreement, according to one estimate there would be a 99% chance that they would be caught. In exchange for these heavy limitations and unprecedented oversight, Iran would no longer be subject to sanctions from the US, EU, and other parties, that effectively isolated and crippled the Iranian economy. It is estimated that the sanctions cost Iran $160 billion in oil revenue alone in the span of just four years. The agreement also allowed Iran access to more than $100 billion in frozen foreign assets. Beyond the more tangible losses caused by the sanctions, investment and growth were crippled under sanctions as Iran no longer had access to the global financial system (BBC 2020).

Since the agreement took effect, the IAEA has released a report every quarter on the verification and monitoring process of the JCPOA. Seeking to hold President Obama accountable for the agreement, Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015, which requires the sitting president to certify Iran’s compliance every 90 days or the agreement would lapse, and sanctions would be reimposed. Upon taking office in 2017, President Donald Trump, an outspoken critic of the deal, repeatedly threated to not certify Iranian compliance. In October 2017, Trump made good on his threats, refusing to certify Iranian compliance, though Congress did not consent to re-imposing sanctions. In May 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would no longer participate in the JCPOA and reinstate sanctions. President Rouhani of Iran, while displeasured by the US withdrawal, expressed interest in preserving the deal with the P5+1 nations, save the United States. Iran maintained compliance with the JCPOA until mid-2019, when it exceeded 300 kg of uranium, enriched uranium past the 3.67% threshold, develop new centrifuge technology, removing all centrifuge limits, and exceeding 130 metric tons of heavy water. While all of these changes are in violation of the JCPOA, Iran continues to express interest in cooperation with the IAEA and insists that it has no desire to achieve a nuclear weapon. As of today, November 2020, the agreement still remains partially intact, although the United States and Iran have both breached their agreements (Nuclear Threat Initiative).

American Support for the JCPOA

American proponents of the deal, including President Obama, have repeatedly insisted that it is the safest, most reliable, most comprehensive way to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. More than one hundred countries agreed, voicing their support for the deal. Notably, Israel, the United States’ strongest ally in the Middle East, is not one of them (Iran Deal). Supporters point out that the deal cuts off all paths to a nuclear weapon for Iran and provides assurance that, if Iran were to change its mind and ignore the provisions of the deal, it would be publicly known (Sherman). It took two years of intense negotiations from diplomats of eight countries to come to a deal, meaning that improving on such a deal for any party is highly unlikely. Proponents also point out that, not only did the US preserve provisions from previous agreements, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Lausanne, and Additional Protocol, but it expanded on all of these. According to one source, there were 19 redlines from the Supreme Leader—or supposedly non-negotiable points—that were all conceded by the deal and it still passed. While not perfect, the JCPOA buys at least fifteen years of certified assurance that Iran will not develop a nuclear weapon. To supporters of the JCPOA, the idea that any better deal could realistically be negotiated is ludicrous (Fitzpatrick).

American Criticisms of the JCPOA

American critics of the deal have been outspoken in their opposition to the Agreement. First, critics argue that implementing sunset provisions on the deal will allow the Iranians to eventually develop a weapon, just at a later time. They also argue that it provides great benefit to the Iranian economy without addressing many other issues, including the Iranian government’s abysmal human rights record and its state support for terrorism. Some oppose the deal on moral grounds—seeing it as rewarding Tehran for decades of “bad behavior.” There is also the matter of what Iran will do with its improved finances. Perhaps they will, as they have in the past, use the money to fund proxies in the region to destabilize their neighbors, many of whom are US allies. One could view the deal as the United States consenting to increased funding for terrorism. Those who view Iran as a geopolitical adversary feel that, had the sanctions been continued for a bit longer, more aggressive provisions could have been induced and other problematic behaviors curbed. The economic isolation that Iran’s nuclear program caused led to massive inflation rates, enormous public debt, food shortages, and little prospect of recovery in the near future. These shortages were deteriorating the Iranian people’s trust in their government, slowly deteriorating its legitimacy. With the JCPOA, critics argue that the US gave all of that up for not enough in return (Maloney).

The Trump administration has expressed its displeasure with the JCPOA for many reasons. First, it claims Iran will have a quick path to a bomb immediately after the sunset provisions expire, leading to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Secondly, the administration cites Israeli intelligence which, though disputed by international experts, claims Iran lied for years about its nuclear program to assert that Iran entered the deal in “bad faith.” It claims that inspection protocols are not strict enough and that it does nothing to curb Iranian development of ballistic missiles. They also cite an increase in funding for Hezbollah and other “bad actors” in the region as a direct result of the prosperity from lifted sanctions. Numerous Americans are still held hostage in Iran. The Trump administration believes that they can pressure the Iranian regime into a better deal, a deal which can address many of these issues in addition to the Iranian nuclear deal (Pompeo). At a high level, the Trump administration’s Iran strategy includes the following core elements: deny Iran all paths to a nuclear weapon, deny the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps funding for its malign activities, counter threats posed by ballistic missiles and other advanced conventional weapons, condemn the IRGC’s human rights violations, and revitalize traditional allies in the region (Brady).

Perspectives from Iran

In Iran, the JCPOA, while more widely accepted than in the United States, is still controversial to some. The Supreme Leader has argued that the United States and the West should not be trusted and that the nation’s opposition to American policy has not changed as a result of the agreement. More moderate factions, such as President Rouhani, have argued that Iran should have no “permanent enemies” and that the agreement marks “a beginning for creating an atmosphere of friendship and cooperation with various countries.” The division in Iran is generally between those who believe that ideology should drive foreign policy and the pragmatists. The agreement is far more popular among the latter than the former (Katzman).

Consequences of Withdrawal

The consequences of the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from its end of the JCPOA are far reaching and, as of now, not entirely known. The primary consequence was a wave of criticism, both from inside and outside the United States. In the United States, Republicans generally supported the President’s decision while Democrats generally did not. With the exception of Israel, nearly every country involved denounced the decision. In Iran, the decision validated hardliner claims that the United States could not be trusted, harming the ability for a deal to be made in the future. The Iranian economy also saw considerable harm from the reimposition of American sanctions, leading to increased interest rates and other economic woes (Albright, Young, Eisenstadt, & Roule).

My Opinion

As for my personal opinion on the matter, I am a strong critic of the President’s decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA. Before I explain why, I would like to clarify that I sympathize with critics of the deal who say that it did not go far enough—failing to address many of the other activities which the Islamic Republic of Iran has engaged in to undermine the United States and its allies. I understand the apprehension at allowing any state sponsor of terrorism, especially one as large as Iran, to line its coffers with profits from dealings with the West. I agree that, while Iran followed the letter of the deal, it did not follow its spirit. The gamble that President Obama took that the deal would stimulate Iran to follow international law more generally and develop a better relationship with the community of nations, did not pay off. That is not to say, however, that the JCPOA was not successful.

In fact, up until the Trump administration withdrew from the deal, the JCPOA was successfully accomplishing exactly what it set out to do. Iran’s ability to create a nuclear weapon was effectively limited for at least the next fifteen years and international inspectors were given, by nearly every credible account, sufficient access to certify that Iran was, in fact, not cheating. The Iranian regime had, for decades, held out, giving little ground in negotiations, and posing a great danger to the United States and its allies. To finally bring them to the bargaining table and get them to agree to a deal that, all things considered, gives up a lot, is a remarkable achievement and the culmination of decades of hard work from all parties involved. To think that such a deal could be thrown out and improved upon overnight by a new administration is simply hubris. That is why so many other countries remained in the deal and denounced the United States’ decision to leave.

In addition to the implausibility of reaching a better deal, many of the Trump administration’s critiques of the deal are flimsy at best and downright false at worst. They claimed that once Iran “ran out the clock” when some of the provisions expired, they would be on the fast track to obtaining a bomb, leading to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The opposite is true. The JCPOA was the strongest assurance against a Middle Eastern arms race because it ensured that the primary belligerent would not obtain a nuclear weapon. In fact, leaving the deal has led Iran to further enrich uranium closer to weapons grade, increase its number of centrifuges, and overall increase their capability to produce a nuclear weapon. Such actions, even if they are not intended to produce a weapon, make Iran’s Sunni and Israeli neighbors nervous, increasing the odds that they feel compelled to develop programs of their own. The Trump administration also claims, without evidence, that Iran is cheating the deal. Considering the exceptional oversight of Iran’s facilities and the lingering, radioactive nature of enriched uranium, combined with the IAEA’s certification that Iran has made good on its promises, this assertion is highly doubtful.

Beyond a potential nuclear arms race in the Middle East, the greatest long-term threat that the Trump administration’s decision poses is the undermining of trust in American foreign policy. Withdrawing from an agreement made by a previous administration, especially without substantial grounds to do so, adds an element of uncertainty to any agreement a US administration makes. This has implications for negotiations with other “rogue states,” such as North Korea, or, for that matter, with any other nation. The United States made this deal not just with Iran, but with our allies as well. The decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA was denounced by all American allies, save Israel, and none of the other nations in the deal have reimposed sanctions. The US has isolated itself on the world stage and weakened its position by giving up its seat at the bargaining table. As an American, I am troubled by the long-term implications of this and other isolating decisions on perceptions of the United States government abroad.

While I agree that there still are issues with Iran that need to be addressed, withdrawing from the JCPOA is not the way to solve them. As previously mentioned, it validates anti-American factions in Iran who say the West cannot be trusted. Alternatively, a cooperative agreement that further integrates Iran into the world economic system would validate the moderates in Iran, who believe that Iran should have “no permanent enemies.” When attempting to address other issues with Iran, such as their sponsorship of such groups as Hezbollah, it would behoove the US government to have all the other world powers on its side in coercing Iran to curb such activities. Our allies are now too focused on picking up the pieces of the deal the US had broken and preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon to worry about other matters. If the US is serious about changing Iran’s behavior for the better, leaving the JCPOA is certainly not the way to do it.

Finally, I oppose the withdrawal from the JCPOA on moral grounds. Sanctions cause real harm to the millions of innocent civilians living in Iran. If the United States is going to cause food shortages to millions of people, it better have a good reason. When the Obama administration tightened sanctions, I believe it was justified because the threat of nuclear proliferation is great enough to justify it. Raising sanctions and causing great harm on a nation that was following its end of the bargain without any exceptionally convincing is morally wrong. The more I learn about the deal, the more I believe the decision to withdraw had far more to do with partisan posturing and appeasing certain groups stateside than with the safety of the world.

Conclusion

For years, Iran has posed a geopolitical threat to both the United States and its allies. However, it must not be forgotten that Iran is a complex, diverse country just like the United States. While it is a theocracy, it is also a democracy and the everyday Iranian has more say in the politics of his or her government than just about every other country in the region. From my perspective, the Iranian desire to obtain nuclear weapons has far more to do with nationalism and respect than actual military use. Whether it is true or not, many feel that their country needs a nuclear weapon to attain respect on the international stage. When a US president rips up an agreement made two years prior with your country for seemingly arbitrary reasons, it can make one feel disrespected. I believe that if Iranians trust that their country can become a regional powerhouse without a nuclear weapon, the chances of the nation developing one are slim. Alas, the seeds of mistrust planted by overthrowing a democratic leader in 1953 have grown into something far more troubling. My hope is that they grow no more.

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