

Iranian Ideology after the Nuclear Deal

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The Obama administration's Iran policy has been driven by the conviction that reaching a deal with Iran over its nuclear weapons program would constitute a historic diplomatic breakthrough, lead to a fundamental transformation in U.S.-Iranian relations, and prompt significant changes in the Islamic Republic's international behavior. This view was apparently based on a belief that American opposition to Iran's policies played a critical role in perpetuating Tehran's destabilizing activities, and that pursuing a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic could consequently lead to more moderate policies. As President Obama framed the approach in his inaugural address in 2009, "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."¹

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the negotiations that led to it between Iran and the P5+1 powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany) represented that extended hand. Iran has profited tremendously from the agreement to date, in the form of billions of dollars of unfrozen assets² and a surge of new post-sanctions trade with foreign partners.³ Yet, a year after the deal's implementation, there are little to no signs of change in Iran, no evidence of the fist unclenching. And the deal itself is in mortal danger from political changes in the United States and continued misbehavior by Tehran.

Wishful Thinking

The JCPOA was formally implemented on January 16, 2016.⁴ President Obama celebrated the occasion by saying that the agreement concluded with Tehran guaranteed that "Iran will not get its hands on a nuclear bomb," and that while the agreement "was never intended to resolve all of our differences," the process of negotiation itself "has created a unique opportunity – a window – to try to resolve important issues."⁵ Obama acknowledged that several major problems remained to be addressed, among them Iran's missile program, threats to regional allies like Israel, support for terrorism and violent proxy regimes, and its pervasive human rights violations. But, he noted, the Iranian people "have the opportunity to begin building new ties with the world" and "pursue a new path – a different, better future that delivers progress for both our peoples and the wider world."⁶

A year on, however, there is no indication that Iran has taken the opportunity to pursue this new path—an outcome that should have been anticipated by policymakers in Washington. After all, when the JCPOA was implemented, Iran immediately achieved its strategic goal of sanctions relief, primarily through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, which terminated previous UN resolutions sanctioning Iran for its nuclear program.⁷ In exchange, Iran promised to freeze its nuclear program for about a decade, and to

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submit to a limited verification regime. But the sanctions relief granted under UNSCR 2231 was not contingent on Iran altering any other policies, or shifting its strategy in the Middle East or elsewhere.

The notion that the JCPOA opened a window to resolve issues in other spheres, then, was based on the erroneous assumption that the Islamic Republic in fact wanted to change strategic course. However, nothing in Tehran's statements or behavior since implementation day has indicated that it is prepared to roll back its missile program, reduce its support for regional proxies, or moderate its hostility to Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States. In fact, these initiatives represent core elements of the Iranian regime's pervasive—and persistent—ideological outlook.

Iranian Ideology and the Bomb

Since the return of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from exile in 1979 and the advent of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran has consistently stressed several ideological themes: the supremacy of Shi'a Islam (particularly over the Sunni sect); the unity of religion, government and daily life under the Koran; the extension of its regional and global influence, and; the destruction of Iran's enemies, particularly Israel and the United States. Iran, in other words, is not just a Middle Eastern adversary state with dreams of regional hegemony, but a revolutionary regime seeking to reshape the region's map and the world's belief system. As such, normalizing relations with the West represents a threat to the Iranian regime's core beliefs and mission.⁸

This revolutionary agenda has manifested itself in a number of ways. Over the past three decades, Tehran has built the world's largest international terrorist network—a web of proxies that includes Shi'ite militias in neighboring Iraq, as well as radical groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. It goes to great lengths to promote its ideology in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in countries with sizeable Shi'ite populations throughout the Gulf region (such as Bahrain).⁹ Additionally, Iran has

long been a key backer of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and is now deeply engaged in fighting the western-backed rebels seeking to overthrow the regime in Damascus.¹⁰ Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, meanwhile, have captured vast swathes of territory and disrupted the established pro-Western government of Abd Rabbo al-Hadi in Sana'a.¹¹ The list goes on.

Significantly, Iran does not engage in this behavior simply to vex Washington, or in response to Western imperialism. Nor are these simply the workings of power politics and *realpolitik*. Rather, Tehran's efforts are a forthright expression of the strategic direction established by Ayatollah Khomeini and perpetuated by his loyalists—a direction that is still being pursued by the regime today.

Iran's nuclear weapons program fits into this same framework. It represents a symptom of Tehran's worldview, not a cause. Absent the Islamic Republic's revolutionary aspirations, there would be no need to acquire weapons of mass destruction, build terror networks, proselytize Shi'ite beliefs, or engage in any other such destabilizing actions. But so long as Iran remains a revisionist power it cannot be counted on to moderate its behavior.

Iran's leadership has been frank in affirming this. In July 2015, shortly after concluding negotiations over the JCPOA, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a speech that U.S. policies in the region were "180 degrees" opposed to Iran's. He was answered by the familiar chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."¹² This is but one of many indicators that Iran never saw the JCPOA as anything more than a means of dismantling sanctions, and certainly not as the harbinger of a sea-change in relations with the west.

The Fatwa Myth

President Obama likewise based his belief that change was possible on the idea that Tehran considers nuclear weapons un-Islamic. In February 2015, while the negotiations over the JCPOA were still ongoing, he argued publicly that it was

possible to reach an agreement that gave Iran access to peaceful uses of nuclear power without fear of it being weaponized. “[I]f, in fact, what they claim is true,” Obama said, “which is they have no aspiration to get a nuclear weapon, that, in fact, according to their Supreme Leader, it would be contrary to their faith to obtain a nuclear weapon—if that is true, there should be the possibility of getting a deal.”¹³

The President was referring to an alleged *fatwa* issued by Iran’s current Supreme Leader declaring nuclear weapons *haram* (religiously forbidden under Islamic law). Yet, although widely reported upon in the press, this *fatwa* has never been published, unlike all of Khamenei’s other religious edicts. The closest thing to a public statement to this effect appeared on the web page of Iran’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations in a message outlining that Iran “has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons” and “the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin and believes the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive and dangerous.”¹⁴ Notably, this statement makes no reference to the Koran or any other Islamic text or tradition; it simply restates Iran’s public posture regarding its secret weapons programs.

Indeed, there is no strong history of faith-based government opposition to nuclear weapons in the Islamic world. Pakistan, the only Muslim majority country with nuclear weapons, has never questioned whether Muslims could possess or use the bomb. Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who first espoused the concept of the “Islamic Bomb,” wrote in 1977 that “the Christian, Jewish and Hindu civilizations have [nuclear] capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.”¹⁵ And when Pakistan tested its first nuclear weapon in 1998, Iran did not condemn Islamabad. Rather, it sent its congratulations. Iran’s views on nuclear weapons at that time were encapsulated by then-Deputy President Sayed Ayatollah

Mohajerani, who told an Islamic conference in 1992, “since Israel continues to possess nuclear weapons, we, the Muslims, must cooperate to produce an atomic bomb, regardless of U.N. efforts to prevent proliferation.”¹⁶

If anything, the supposed advent of the anti-nuclear *fatwa* should be viewed as means of deflecting attention from Iran’s nuclear program in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq—a campaign ostensibly designed to destroy Baghdad’s weapons of mass destruction. If the Islamic Republic’s leaders truly believed that nuclear weapons were forbidden by religious law, Tehran would not have been engaging in activities geared solely toward producing nuclear weapons in the first place, and there would have been no need for the JCPOA.

No Changes from Iran

In July 2015, President Obama declared that he hoped the nuclear deal could lead to continued conversations with the Islamic regime “that incentivize them to behave differently in the region, to be less aggressive, less hostile, more cooperative” and to generally behave in the way nations in the international community are expected to behave.¹⁷ The comments were of a piece with the views of the most optimistic proponents of the deal, who believed that the process could open the door to more comprehensive détente, empower Iranian moderates, and lead to a gradual, peaceful form of regime change—a change of heart, if not of leadership.

However, the Islamic Republic’s leadership never agreed to the Obama administration’s notion that the JCPOA would or should lead to changes in its ideology, strategy, policy or behavior. In fact, at the time, Ayatollah Khamenei sharply and publicly rebuked the President and rejected the notion that the nuclear deal would somehow lead to an opening that would promote moderating influences inside Iran. In a meeting with members of the Islamic Radio and Television Union in August 2015, Khamenei said that while U.S. leaders thought the nuclear deal would “open up Iran to their influence,”

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13. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama and Chancellor Merkel in Joint Press Conference,” February 9, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/09/remarks-president-obama-and-chancellor-merkel-joint-press-conference>.

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his government had "blocked this path and will definitely block it in the future. We won't allow American political, economic or cultural influence in Iran."¹⁸

The Administration should have realized this from the start. Negotiations with Iran were tightly restricted. The regime was not interested in discussing any critical issues outside of Iran's nuclear program and sanctions relief, and western negotiators did not push them to do so. Missile proliferation, regime support for terrorism and insurgency, conventional arms trafficking, financial crimes and human rights were all conspicuously left off the table. And with the deal entailing the lifting of a significant portion of sanctions levied to date against Tehran, the regime quickly understood that it had no incentive to transform.

Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) noted this problem when he announced his opposition to the JCPOA, highlighting "the very real risk that Iran will not moderate and will, instead, use the agreement to pursue its nefarious goals is too great."¹⁹ Iranian human rights activists also argued that empowering the regime would not lead to the hoped-for moderation, but will "distance the likelihood of positive change and undercut the hopes of the Iranian people," and that "appeasing the Iranian regime will lead to a more dangerous world."²⁰

Predictably, Iran has not changed its behavior with respect to regional conflicts, and has taken a principled stand against even discussing the matter. In a speech in September 2016, the country's Supreme Leader took issue with the notion that such negotiations would be useful or favorable for Iran. "The Americans insist we negotiate with them on regional issues, especially on Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen," Khamenei said. "What is their main goal for requesting these talks? They have no aim but to prevent the presence in the region of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main factor of America's failures."²¹ He instead asserted that the threat and use of force was the principle means of deterring U.S. actions and reducing the American presence in the

region. "In past years, some officials have said the removal of military threat and war were due to certain measures, but it's not true," Iran's chief cleric said. "The sole factor of removing military threats has been and will remain military and defense power and the creation of fear in the enemy."²² In other words, the clenched fist is more effective than the extended hand.

The JCPOA likewise has not discouraged Iran from pursuing its ballistic missile program, and in fact has hindered the ability of the U.S to respond to it. The topic of limiting Iran's missiles came up early in the P5+1 negotiations, but was quickly dropped. It did not seem to be a problem, since the United Nations and other international organizations already had sets of restrictions in place. But most of those limitations were negated under the final terms of the JCPOA. When Iran tested two new ballistic missiles in March 2016, the United States objected that they violated United Nations restrictions on Iran's missile program.²³ But Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin countered, saying that Iran's missile test did not in fact violate UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which had established the new framework for the JCPOA.²⁴

Churkin was correct. Resolution 2231 rescinded six previous resolutions aimed at restricting Iran's nuclear and missile programs. In particular, it negated Resolution 1929, which instructed that "Iran shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using ballistic missile technology, and that States shall take all necessary measures to prevent the transfer of technology or technical assistance to Iran related to such activities." This language was the basis for a number of national and international missile-related sanctions.²⁵ The language in resolution 2231 "called upon" Iran not to engage in missile tests, but did not grant member states any power to stop Iran if it did.²⁶

Thus, rather than promoting stability, the JCPOA has enabled Iran to pursue its missile program without the practical limits

outlined under the old framework. And when the United States suggested imposing a new round of sanctions, Iran claimed that doing so would abrogate the JCPOA, since the version of the deal passed by Iran's parliament contained language to that effect.²⁷

Finally, there is reason to believe that Iran is continuing to pursue its nuclear weapons program in violation of the JCPOA. In July 2016, German intelligence reported that Iran had attempted to acquire illicit nuclear technology at "quantitatively high level," and that "it is safe to expect that Iran will continue its intensive procurement activities in Germany using clandestine methods to achieve its objectives."²⁸ In fact, Iran made 141 such attempts in 2015, compared to 83 in 2013. Iran has also illicitly attempted to acquire carbon-fiber materials for advanced centrifuges.²⁹ The IAEA has not been able to determine the full extent to which Iran has frozen its nuclear program, and the aspects of the program that have been verifiably suspended are quickly reversible. Compounding the problem, the international community had a poor idea of what Iran's baseline nuclear capability was to begin with, and so has no clear notion of what has been stopped.³⁰

Thus, the high hopes for fundamental change on the part of Iran have been dashed. Not only has the JCPOA not led to the hoped-for transformation of the Islamic Republic, it may not even be halting the illicit nuclear program it was supposed to stop.

A Collapsing Framework

Political developments in the United States, however, may soon render discussion of the impact of the JCPOA on Iran moot. The advent of the Trump administration, as well as the extension of U.S. sanctions not related to the nuclear program, could create pressures that lead to one or both countries pulling out of the agreement.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, then-candidate Donald J. Trump called the nuclear deal "one of the worst deals ever made by any country in history" and

pledged to either renegotiate it, scrap it, or "police that contract so tough they don't have a chance." Ayatollah Khamenei responded strongly to Mr. Trump's statements, saying that Iran "won't be the first to violate the nuclear deal" but that Iran would "set fire to the deal" if the United States tore it up.³¹

The day after Trump's election victory, President Hassan Rouhani said that the electoral outcome has "no effect on the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran," and that the constructive engagement policy and "lifting of nuclear-related sanctions have made our economic relations with all countries expanding and irreversible." He also noted that the multilateral nuclear deal could not simply be abrogated by the unilateral actions of one of the signatories.³² Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also emphasized the multidimensional aspect of the deal, saying Mr. Trump is "obliged to stay committed to this not bilateral but multilateral nuclear deal" and that he is "certain that the international community also has the same expectation."³³ He added that "every U.S. president has to understand the realities of today's world."³⁴ A few Iranian officials even struck a hopeful note that what they saw as president-elect Trump's essential pragmatism would steer him in a more moderate course regarding the deal.³⁵

Iran has also signaled swift action if and when Mr. Trump makes good on his pledge to withdraw from the agreement. In November 2016, at a celebration of the 37th anniversary of the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the deputy commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, said that if the United States did not abide by its commitments under the JCPOA Iran would "send the deal to a museum."³⁶ Subsequently, in a speech at Tehran University on December 6th, President Hassan Rouhani said of Mr. Trump, "Do you think that he can rip up the JCPOA? Do you think we and our nation will let him do that?" He noted that "there is no doubt that the United States is our enemy."³⁷

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37. Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Rouhani Says Iran Will Not Let Trump Rip Up Nuclear Deal," *Reuters*, December 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-nuclear-deal-idUSKBN13V0MJ>

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39. "Iran Vows Not to Let Destroy Nuclear Deal," *Fox News.com*, December 6, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/12/06/iran-vows-not-to-let-trump-destroy-nuclear-deal.html>

40. Sharafedin and Wilkin, "Iran Still Closed to U.S. Influence After Nuclear Deal: Khamenei."

Iran has also threatened to respond to any continued U.S. sanctions, even those unrelated to the nuclear program. On December 1, 2016, the U.S. Senate voted 99-0 to extend the *Iran Sanctions Act*. The Act, which was introduced in 1996, was intended to sanction Tehran not only for its nuclear program but also for support of terrorist groups in the region, which is not covered by the JCPOA. In response to the vote, President Rouhani told the parliament in Tehran that the extension represented "a blatant violation of the Iran deal."³⁸ Rouhani further noted that Iran is "committed to an acceptable implementation of the deal but in response to non-commitment, violation or hesitation in its implementation, we will act promptly."³⁹

Thus, within a year of its implementation, hopes that the JCPOA would usher in a new era of relations with Iran appear to be defunct. There remains only the question whether the agreement will survive at all, and—if it doesn't—whether Iran or the United States is the one that delivers the fatal blow to the deal.

Wishful Thinking and Uncomfortable Facts

The Obama administration's belief that the diplomatic engagement with Iran that culminated in the JCPOA could lead to fundamental changes in the Islamic Republic was based on flawed premises. The regime in Tehran had never indicated that it wanted to enhance its relationship with the West, or to pursue internal reforms that would give greater voice to moderate policies. Indeed, had Iran wanted to undertake this type of fundamental change there was nothing standing in its way, even absent a nuclear agreement.

The Administration correctly asserted that decades of strong sanctions had brought Iran to the negotiating table, but then proceeded to bargain this carefully constructed system of leverage away for the promise of a decade of good behavior and the belief that greater achievements were possible once a deal was done. Tehran, on the other hand, took a more instrumental view of the negotiations,

seeing them principally as a means of removing a punishing sanctions regime without giving up its long-term nuclear ambitions. Iran achieved this objective without having to deviate from its overall regional or global strategy or to moderate its revolutionary tone. None other than Iran's Supreme Leader himself has explicitly rejected the view propounded by the Obama administration that the JCPOA or the framework erected for negotiating it could lead to improved bilateral relations or to any changes inside Iran.⁴⁰

If anything, Iran's signal achievement in destroying the international sanctions regime should serve to reinforce the country's sense of mission, as well as markedly improve its financial situation and military power. And if the deal soon collapses, as now seems probable, Iran will likely relaunch its nuclear program with renewed vigor.

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