

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***Negotiating with Iran: Two Competing Visions***

Two visions for the Middle East's future are colliding, and the vital center of that collision is Iran. President Obama assumes that the current Iranian regime will choose GDP over ideology. History tells us that the West has assumed that past rogue regimes would choose national interest over ideology and religion—that “prudent calculation and statecraft would trump megalomania” (per columnist David Brooks). This was the assumption before the summer of 1914, when World War I began. The West assumed the same with Adolf Hitler between 1936 and 1939. Currently, this is the assumption with ISIS and with the growing tension between the Sunni and Shiite extremists active in the Middle East. Brooks writes that “The Obama administration is making a similar projection today. It is betting that Iran can turn into a fundamentally normal regime, which can be counted upon to put GDP over ideology and religion and do the pragmatic thing.” This projection stems from Obama's vision of a new Middle East: Obama seeks to lure Iran away from its revolutionary radicalism and connect it with the international and economic diplomatic system. “By reaching an agreement on nukes and lifting the sanctions, Iran would re-emerge as America's natural partner in the region. It has an educated middle class that is interested in prosperity and is not terribly anti-American. Global integration would strengthen Iranian moderates and reinforce democratic tendencies. Once enmeshed in the global system, Iran would work to tame Hezbollah and Hamas and would cooperate to find solutions in Gaza, Iraq and Syria. There would be a more stable balance of power between the major powers.” The key to the fulfillment of Obama's vision is, of course, a nuclear deal with Iran. In 2012, he stated that he would not permit Iran to maintain its nuclear program; that Iran should never be able to enrich uranium. Six UN resolutions supported this principle. Everything we now know is that President Obama has abandoned this principle. Now, apparently, the administration is willing to permit Iran to have 6,000 centrifuges for uranium enrichment. In addition, all restrictions on its nuclear program would be temporary and would then be phased out over a decade after the agreement (the so-called “sunset clause”). Further, the current agreement says nothing about Iran's ballistic missile program. Why have ballistic missiles if not to carry nuclear warheads? Monitoring and enforcement of this agreement would depend on an inspection system, which based on past agreements, has not worked well at all. Why would this agreement be different? So far, Obama's efforts in negotiating with Iran have succeeded in offending Saudi Arabia, Egypt and, naturally, Israel.

Why does Obama believe he can lure Iran into switching its allegiances? Does he really believe that Iran will abandon its deep-seated commitment to its Shiite religion and ideology? Does he really believe that Iran will now be driven by pragmatic, non-ideological diplomacy? Brooks writes that “It could be that Iran finances terrorist groups and destabilizes regimes like Yemen's

and Morocco's for a reason. It could be that Iran's leaders really believe what they say. It could be that Iranian leaders are as apocalyptically motivated, paranoid and dogmatically anti-American as their pronouncements suggest they are. It could be that Iran will be as destabilizing and hegemonically inclined as all its recent actions suggest. Iran may be especially radical if the whole region gets further inflamed by Sunni-Shia rivalry or descends into greater and greater Islamic State-style fanaticism . . . If the Iranian leaders believe what they say, then United States policy should be exactly the opposite of the one now being pursued. Instead of embracing and enriching Iran, sanctions should be toughened to further isolate and weaken it. Instead of accepting a nuclear capacity, eliminating that capacity should be restored as the centerpiece of American policy." Instead of alienating all of our friends over our Iranian policy, we should be strengthening and cultivating those relationships as a bulwark against the growing militancy of Iran. Obama is choosing not to pursue that goal; instead, he is willing to ultimately remove all sanctions over time in exchange for this spurious, dangerous agreement.

The other vision of Iran and the Middle East is that of Israel, of its leader Benjamin Netanyahu. He spoke to Congress last week in what became a controversial speech. Setting all the controversy aside, his speech cast another vision—not of a cooperative Iran that Obama hopes to trust to build a new order in the Middle East, but of a duplicitous, devious, nefarious Iran bent on the destruction of its enemies, including Israel, with nuclear weapons. He called the Iranian regime "a dark and brutal dictatorship" engaged in a "march of conquest, subjugation and terror." Why should we expect that Iran will change its ideology or its clearly-articulated and aggressive goals? For those who are intellectually honest, Netanyahu raised two profoundly important questions that must be answered: (1) Does it make sense for the world community to accept, as a part of this proposed agreement, a large Iranian nuclear infrastructure? Is it reasonable or even sensible to accept the presence of thousands of centrifuges for uranium enrichment? (2) Does it make sense to have a "sunset clause" of a decade or so which would permit Iran to expand its production of nuclear materials? Netanyahu correctly observed that such a clause "doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb; it paves Iran's path to the bomb." A realistic and wise policy would insist that Iran abandon its nuclear program completely and decisively and that it abandon its ballistic missile program. If not, then sanctions should continue and even more severe sanctions should be imposed until Iran changes its behavior in the region. Iran remains an aggressor in the region; it remains a relentless supporter of terrorism in all its forms; and it remains a potent, virulent enemy of Israel, bent on its destruction and annihilation. If President Obama is really interested in changing Iran's behavior, this should be his path. He says that Netanyahu has offered no alternative to his negotiation strategy. But he has—continued sanctions and a stalwart, united front against Iranian duplicity and terror.

One final note about this contrast in visions is the effect Obama's agreement would have on the rest of the Middle East. As most have acknowledged, an agreement such as the one Obama is considering will likely result in a new era of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey will seek to achieve the same "nuclear threshold" as Iran. And when the ten-year window of the agreement begins to close, with Iran freed from all limits, the race for nuclear weapons will accelerate. Few would regard this as a positive development in the

Middle East. Without Iran truly being stripped of its nuclear capability, which this agreement will not do, the Middle East will become even more volatile and unstable. At the very least, Prime Minister Netanyahu has raised the bar of what a good deal with Iran should look like. The current agreement as we understand it right now does not meet the criteria of a “good deal.” It is a very bad deal indeed. President Obama’s vision is an unrealistic one, based on a set of assumptions that bear no resemblance to the real world of the Middle East. For all the controversy surrounding Netanyahu’s speech, the one thing it did accomplish was to sharpen the focus of a negotiated deal with Iran.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (27 February 2015); editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (28 February-1 March 2015); editorial in the *Washington Post* (3 March 2015); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (26 February 2015); David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (3 March 2015).