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Future of Nonproliferation after a Nuclear Deal with Iran

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The negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) have produced the parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to contain Iran's nuclear program. Regardless of the final outcome of the JCPOA negotiations in June, these negotiations are affecting the future of nonproliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and beyond. This piece analyzes the nonproliferation impact of Iranian nuclear politics. But first, it is critical to understand the Iranian rationale for pursuing a nuclear capability at great economic and political cost because this has direct ramifications for the nonproliferation analysis.

Iran's Long Quest for Nuclear Technology

The Iranian nuclear program did not begin in 2002. It was formulated during the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi era and was reinvigorated by the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. Following the victory of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian regime found itself at odds with most of its neighbors and with major powers, such as the United States and the Soviet Union. Iran's sense of being beleaguered, isolated, and victimized dramatically increased during its war with Iraq. Its war with Iraq taught the regime in Tehran several interconnected lessons and solidified the Iranian leadership's quest to find an irrevocable security measure, not only to safeguard the country of Iran, but more specifically, to secure survivability of the regime. Seen from the Iranian perspective, and justifiably so, Iraq was the aggressor, but the international system, dominated by the United States and most of Iran's Arab neighbors, stood either on the sidelines or supported Baghdad. The international system, according to Iran, failed even to respond to the Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iranian targets. The assistance Iran did receive was part of the policies of some parties to keep both the regimes in Baghdad and Tehran engaged in fighting each other and, thus, weak and unable to act aggressively elsewhere. In short, the war with Iraq taught the Iranian leadership that the international system did not work in their favor; the international system was not based on equality of states and justice; and finally, that coercion, if exercised cautiously through mechanisms of deniability of

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responsibility, could achieve results that were unattainable through playing by the rules.

Towards its end, the Iran-Iraq War brought Iran and the United States into direct military confrontations, exposing the fundamental inadequacy of Iran's conventional military power. Furthermore, the United States did not bow to the pressures of Iranian coercion in the Persian Gulf. It can be argued that this U.S. action was instrumental to Tehran's decision to end the war without achieving its final stated objective of removal of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power or its securing any assurance that its border with Iraq would not be violated again. In Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's words, he did away with his honor and drank the poisoned chalice, however, "for safeguarding of Islam and the protection of the Islamic republic."

The increased distrust of the international community of the Iranian regime and Iran's inability to reconcile its weak conventional army contributed to Iran's decision to go down the path of developing a nuclear weapons capability. It was considered part of Iran's national security strategy and became part of its national identity. Around the mid-point of the 1980s, Khomeini decided that, to secure the survival of the Islamic system from the perceived existential threats emanating from the United States and Israel, the regime needed to have a nuclear program. The authors have no doubts that the intention of Iran's nuclear program is to provide the regime with the technical ability to produce nuclear weapons. That said, we cannot be sure whether the country currently has plans or the capability to produce deliverable nuclear warheads and the associated delivery systems. Iranian leaders have continued to develop Iran's nuclear program as a source of national pride and dignity while denying that it has a military dimension. They claim it is purely for peaceful energy and medical research purposes and serves as a symbol of Iran's right to self-determination. However, many discoveries have been made by concerned parties, which put these claims into serious question.

Internal and External Threats to the Iranian Regime

The regime entered the last decade of the twentieth century without the charismatic and unchallenged leadership of its founder and principal ideologue, Khomeini. This led to increased factionalism within the country's political system. During this time, there were the initial signs of a thaw in relations with the United States—Iran's major perceived arch enemy. However, U.S.-Iranian relations refroze. Tehran's sponsorship of terrorism, development of nuclear technology, active opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and abhorrent human rights records led to the imposition of economic sanctions by Washington in 1995. Despite the 1997 election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami, who spoke of "dialogue among civilizations" and whose government supported the U.S.-led efforts in Afghanistan, relations did not improve. Furthermore, in January 2002, then U.S. president George W. Bush's inclusion of Iran in the "axis of evil" cemented Iran's perception, and indeed conviction, that Washington's basic policy was to change the regime in Tehran, and not just the regime's behavior.

During Khatami's presidency, Iran took some of its most crucial steps toward establishing a viable nuclear program. Iran tested centrifuges and began constructing a covert uranium enrichment facility near Natanz and a heavy water production plant in Arak. These actions were in violation of Iran's safeguard agreements and the verification requirements under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The revelation of these illicit activities prompted greater attention from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and increased political and economic pressure to curb Iran's nuclear program. In talks with France, Germany and the United Kingdom (EU-3), Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment temporarily and forgo nuclear weapons, and the Europeans recognized Iran's right to work on nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Khatami's reformist presidency and policies resulted in the militarization of Iran's political landscape. It forced the relatively venerable Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to increase reliance on the hardline members of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) to undermine the populist and relaxed platforms of the reformist movement through direct action against the people and open threats addressed to Khatami and his coalition. In the 2005 elections, Khamenei backed the untested nationalist revolutionary candidate Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Perhaps this was due to the perceived dangers to the regime's security and stability after the experience of Khatami's presidency. Ahmadinejad was a hardliner

who practiced a confrontational foreign policy based on destabilizing activities and fiery rhetoric and whose internal policies saw the systematic curtailment of minor freedoms ushered in during Khatami's presidency. To carry out these policies, Ahmadinejad relied on the IRGC, further bringing that organization into prominence.

Soon after Ahmadinejad's election, Iran resumed uranium conversion activities. In response, the IAEA referred Iran to the UN Security Council for noncompliance of its NPT Safeguards Agreement. This led to a series of resolutions, including the sanctioning of Iran. Throughout the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Iran dared the international system with its nuclear advancements while undermining United States' policies in Iraq and the Middle East in general and directly threatening Israel's existence. While Tehran withstood some of the toughest and broadest sanctions ever imposed on any country, their toll on the Iranian economy increasingly mounted. Ahmadinejad linked the nuclear program with Iran's national pride and its greatness narrative, trying to blame the worsening economic conditions of the people to the West's desire to keep a rising Iran from achieving its rightful place in the region.

However, the West could not be the scapegoat for the near demise of the regime in 2009. Rather, it was the political machinations of the regime elites. The systematically irregular 2009 elections which brought Ahmadinejad back for a second term as president nearly resulted in a fatal blow to the system in power since 1979. Khamenei openly supported Ahmadinejad's election and the ensuing brutal crackdown on the protests known as the "Green Movement." By doing this, Khamenei effectively made himself and the very ruling system of the Islamic republic—represented by his office of Supreme Leader—party to the street politics of Iran. In retrospect, by backing Ahmadinejad in 2009, Khamenei won a tactical victory but was faced with losing the strategic battle of safeguarding the regime itself. This time, the culprits were not sons of the Islamic revolution gathered around Khatami who wanted to change the nature of the Islamic Republic to a more accommodating system and with an opaque but expanding nuclear dimension. The new threats to the regime were younger nationalistic revolutionaries and IRGC members. While trying to safeguard the system, these nationalists were in fact undermining it by reducing the power of the Supreme Leader and increasing the power of the popular politics and the IRGC. On the nuclear front, UN Security Council had little trouble in justifying the tough and biting sanctions because of regime's internal and external rhetoric and behavior.

The Regime Savior

Ahmadinejad's socioeconomic and foreign policies left the regime in Iran with its lowest approval rating internally and unprecedented isolation internationally. The authors believe that Khamenei sought to pave the way for a pragmatic and strategic conservative to serve as Iran's next president. This individual needed not only to be a trusted son of the revolution, but also have a proven record of negotiations with the Europeans on Iran's nuclear program. Hasan Ruhani, who had led Iran's negotiations with the EU-3 from 2003 to 2005, knew how to negotiate and also to keep pressure away from Iran by speaking in terms of accommodating to the West. With Ruhani as Iran's new face, a path was set, and the nuclear file was put on the table. EU-3, joined by China, the Russian Federation and the United States, agreed to hold talks with Iran aimed at resolving the nuclear file.

After the political commitment by the P5+1, Iran and the IAEA signed a Framework of Cooperation Agreement, leading in January 2014 to the entry into force of the Joint Plan of Action. After some deadline changes, Iran and P5+1 on 4 April 2015 decided on the parameters for a JCPOA, which is to be finalized and signed before 30 June. On paper, the parameters of JCPOA go a long way in preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability in the coming decade or more. If fully implemented and if Iran upholds its agreements, the IAEA will have very intrusive inspection and verification access to all of Iran's known nuclear facilities, including uranium mines. According to the U.S. Department of State, for a decade after the JCPOA goes into enforcement, the breakout time for Iran to acquire enough fissile material for one weapon will be extended from the current estimated 2 to 3 months to at least a year. And for Iran, the harsh sanctions are lifted the country continues to enrich uranium on its soil effectively keeping to its longstanding redlines. For the Iranian regime, the most immediate and pressing concern has been safeguarding its survival in face of strong—albeit quashed—internal opposition to the very

nature of the Islamic republic, an unmanaged economic crisis, and potential external political and military threats. The JCPOA, if signed, will pave the way for Tehran to resolve most of these concerns. Is this a victory for nonproliferation?

The authors argue that the very negotiations threaten nonproliferation goals. The Islamic regime—that in 2009 openly targeted its own people on the streets and continues to stifle even the most basic of their freedoms, has opposition leaders in confinement for protesting election irregularities, stones women in public, internationally has either called for the destruction of other states in the Middle East, and continues to destabilize a list of regional countries directly or through proxies—now finds itself sitting with the world's six major powers as an equal and accepting their praise. Furthermore, they have not had to give up much to gain much. Therein lies the greatest danger to the advancement of nonproliferation in the region and throughout the world.

The message being sent from Lausanne to other states in the MENA region and beyond has two very different dimensions. On the one hand, the JCPOA is the best way to avoid another war in the Middle East and prevent Iran from making enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon, since under the sanctions regime, the argument goes, Tehran was able to expand its nuclear program. On the other hand, the message is that bad behavior is rewarded. Violating international obligations and possession of a robust nuclear program with weaponization elements present therein are political chips to play when regimes—even the most unsavory—need to advance their own policies, whether internal, regional, or international. And in the end, these regimes do not have to give up too much, just a delay in breakout capability and be subject to inspections of known sites. In the specific case of the MENA region, the Islamic regime can now expand its influence into more regional countries, free from fear of regime change and with international and internal prestige. Of course, this is having ripple effects through the region, as rival regional powers to seek the same level of assurance through attempts to further their own nuclear ambitions.

Beyond the Euphoria

While the P5+1 and Iran are working to sign a JCPOA based on the parameters agreed upon in Lausanne, the work to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons in the MENA region has become more difficult, not simpler. Even with an agreement in place, it is not a sure bet that the Iranian regime, with its impressive track record, will uphold its end of the bargain. Ruhani's own words while negotiating with EU-3 should be a reminder for how Iran might use the calm that would be created by the JCPOA. "While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in Isfahan. ... In fact, by creating a relaxed atmosphere, we were able to complete the work in Isfahan."¹ The regional and international fallout is a whole other issue.

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Notes:

¹ Steven Ditto, "Reading Rouhani: The Promise and Peril of Iran's New President" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 129, October 2013, p. 43.

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