

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4444 | JULY 24, 2015

The Iran Nuclear Agreement: Yes, There *Is* a Better Alternative

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The Obama Administration has argued that there is no better alternative to its controversial nuclear agreement with Iran. But rather than cutting off all paths to a nuclear weapon, as the Administration initially promised, the so-called Vienna Agreement only temporarily slows down Iran's progress toward a nuclear weapons capability and, in fact, protects the regime's nuclear infrastructure and research and development, potentially allowing Iran to become a more robust threshold nuclear breakout state. A credible alternative to this dangerous deal with Iran is to maintain U.S. and U.N. sanctions (or unilateral U.S. sanctions if necessary), keep the military option on the table, and work with partners in the Middle East to force Tehran to accept much tighter restrictions on its nuclear plans.

A Risky Trade-Off

The Vienna Agreement represents a Faustian bargain in which the Obama Administration agreed to dismantle sanctions and legitimize Iran's nuclear program in exchange for temporary restrictions on uranium enrichment, greater (but still limited) access for U.N. inspectors and promises to comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—promises that Tehran has repeatedly broken in the

past. If Iran reneges on the agreement, as it could easily do since most of its concessions are quickly reversible, the international sanctions regime will be almost impossible to put back in place.

After 15 years, limitations on Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium are ended, and enrichment activities can be moved outside the Natanz facility and scaled up massively, making it easier and faster to stage a nuclear breakout. If Tehran bides its time it will be in a much better position to make a final sprint to a nuclear arsenal.

Iran's nuclear expansion will be paid for with the huge financial windfall, estimated at up to \$150 billion, which the regime will pocket in sanctions relief when its frozen assets are released, with tens of billions more dollars coming from expanded oil revenues after sanctions are ended. This enormous signing bonus also will be used to strengthen the ayatollahs' brutal police state, build up its conventional military and ballistic missile forces, and escalate its export of terrorism and subversion.

A Danger to the World

The dangers posed by Iran's enhanced ability to finance global terrorism will be compounded by the Administration's last-minute capitulation on the U.N. arms embargo, which will be lifted in five years. This would allow Iran to upgrade its conventional weapons through imports from foreign suppliers and enable it to more easily arm its foreign allies and surrogates.

The reckless nuclear deal with Iran could lead nervous countries in the region to hedge their bets and seek their own nuclear weapons, fueling a cascade of nuclear proliferation that will undermine U.S. security interests in the volatile Middle East.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4444>

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Saudi Arabia has already let it be known that it will demand the same overly generous concessions on uranium enrichment that Iran received, and has begun negotiations to buy French, Russian, and South Korean nuclear reactors. Other Arab states, and Turkey, are likely to tee up their own nuclear programs as a prudent counterweight to offset Iran's expanding nuclear potential, after some of the restrictions on its uranium-enrichment program automatically sunset.

The bottom line is that the Obama Administration has signed an agreement that will expand Iran's power and influence, undermine confidence in the U.S. as an ally, strain U.S. relations with its regional friends, weaken long-standing nonproliferation goals on restricting access to sensitive nuclear technologies, and contribute to the evolution of a multipolar nuclear Middle East.

These ripple effects will elevate the immediate threat that Iran poses to Israel and the Arab world (especially in the Gulf), which are united in an unprecedented fashion in their opposition to the deal.

An Alternative Policy

Iran is—clearly—likely to cheat on its new commitments, just as it cheated on the old ones. A credible alternative to the bad deal that was agreed does exist. As Secretary of the Treasury Jacob Lew said during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, the United States has powerful sanctions tools at its disposal with or without an agreement.¹ The United Nations sanctions would also remain in place. An alternative to the Vienna Agreement would be to:

- **Block the agreement.** Congress should reset the board and allow the next Administration the opportunity to succeed where this Administration failed. A future President would be better positioned to deter and prevent an Iranian nuclear breakout if he or she is freed from the straitjacket of the Obama Administration's proposed agreement.
- **Impose unilateral economic sanctions.** By refusing to lift its economic sanctions, the U.S. could prevent Tehran from financing its military buildup, terrorist network, or nuclear program

with hundreds of billions of dollars of sanctions relief. Even if some countries might not enforce sanctions with the same determination after a U.S. pullout from the agreement, Iran would still be hobbled by U.S. financial sanctions, which would block it from transferring assets from third countries. On balance, the continuation of sanctions would be an important factor in constraining Iran's ability to advance its nuclear program or threaten the U.S. and its allies.

- **Restore U.S. Credibility in the Middle East.** After the snub by many of the United States' Gulf allies during the recent Camp David summit, and given the frosty relationship between President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it is clear that the U.S. must rebuild its key relationships in the Middle East. The end result would be less pressure for a cascade of nuclear proliferation, particularly if the next U.S. Administration signals its willingness to expand security cooperation, enhance missile defenses, and work closely with Middle East partners.
- **Keep All Options on the Table.** The U.S. should ensure that Iran is permanently deterred from building a nuclear weapon by the enduring threat of U.S. military force. This deterrent would be greater if Congress followed up on its rejection of the Vienna Agreement with a resolution expressing support for preventive military action should Tehran continue on its path to nuclear weapons.

The benefits from an alternative deal are clear:

- It makes the likelihood of war or a conventional and regional nuclear arms race less likely than embracing the Vienna Agreement.
- Rather than being demoralized by what they perceive to be a disastrous nuclear deal, America's friends in the region would be re-energized to contain Iran.
- Rather than fearing an Iranian-American détente at their expense, America's regional

1. U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Iran Nuclear Agreement Review," hearing, July 23, 2015, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/072315> (accessed July 23, 2015).

allies would restore their trust in security ties with the U.S. Moreover, they would be less likely to plot their own nuclear breakouts if reassured of the reliability of U.S. security cooperation.

- Tough economic sanctions, many of which forced Tehran to the negotiating table in the first place, would bring them back to the table to accept much tighter restrictions on its nuclear plans.

Iran Needs Only One Thing: A Little Patience

The U.S. should pursue an Iran policy that prevents Iran from ever becoming a nuclear weapons state—not just for the next 10 to 15 years. The deeply flawed Vienna Agreement will bolster Iran’s economy, boost the military threat it poses, and leave future American Presidents in a weaker position to confront and roll back Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

Restrictions on the quantity and quality of centrifuges dedicated to uranium enrichment expire after 10 years. Once that diplomatic speed bump is passed, Iran will be free to build a massive uranium-enrichment program that will enable it to sprint to a nuclear breakout. While the United States might take the

heat for disapproving the Iran deal in the short run, it will take even more heat down the line when a better-armed and better-funded Iran builds a nuclear weapon and destabilizes the entire region.

The alternative option makes the likelihood of war or a conventional and regional nuclear arms race far less likely than embracing the Vienna Agreement. In the long run, focusing on economic sanctions, military deterrence, and closer security cooperation with Israel, Turkey, and Arab states threatened by Iran would be more effective than trying to bribe Tehran with sanctions relief and nuclear cooperation. That did not work with North Korea and cannot possibly succeed with Iran.

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