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Rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement? Don't even think about it!

Steve Bakke  December 17, 2020



Now that candidate Biden has found an aspirational perch inside his brand new “Office of the President Elect,” we can expect that an important priority will be to stumble (my term) back into the Iran nuclear agreement – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Trump voided our involvement in that ill-advised deal in May 2018. Any thoughts of rejoining the agreement should be dismissed.

The agreement was worked out in 2015 between Iran and several world powers including the U.S. Using 20/20 hindsight, it's difficult to ignore several characteristics that some now find surprising. Here's a sampling:

- President Obama signed the agreement but faced bipartisan opposition in the Senate, so no vote was taken. Without Senate confirmation, it couldn't qualify as a treaty.
- Numerous democrat senators, notably Schumer and Menendez, opposed the agreement because, as Menendez stated, it wasn't based on “preventing nuclear proliferation, but on managing or containing it.”
- Obama was intending to bypass the problematic U.S. Senate and present the agreement first to the United Nations.
- Surprise! The JCPOA was probably unenforceable because Iran never signed it.
- Obama proclaimed assurances that the agreement was “built on verification.” That was fiction. For starters, the U.S. wasn't even allowed to be directly involved in compliance monitoring.
- Iran could designate certain military sites as “off-limits” for inspections. What could go wrong with that?
- Iran could continue developing missile technology, the nuclear warhead delivery mechanism.
- “Side-deals” were struck. For example, in some cases Iran was allowed to independently provide photographs and samples for delivery to the IAEA, the official “inspector.”
- Violations could be neutralized by a single signatory – e.g. Russia or China individually could void penalties levied against Iran.

One must believe Iran has rational leadership before one can have confidence in the original deal. And, reflecting on that agreement, its goals seem aspirational, with emphasis on “getting a deal done.” It was probably pursued by Obama as a “legacy” issue.

Did Trump throw the gates open to Iran’s nuclear ambitions? Absolutely not. The gates were always wide open. Iran could easily nibble around the edges of non-compliance, while advancing their progress, including “limited enrichment,” toward nuclear weapons capabilities. It seems the agreement served only to delay the inevitable result of Iran having nuclear weapons.

It’s reasonable to conclude that the deal would also have raised the likelihood of an arms race among several unreliable regional nations – a dangerous prospect. President Trump decided it was better to deal with the ultimate reality now, rather than later when Iran’s military capabilities would be much greater and temptation for a regional arms race, perhaps with nuclear implications, were better developed.

Prior to Trump voiding the nuclear agreement and increasing sanctions, Iran was enjoying healthy GDP growth, even though violations of the agreement piled up. That was halted. It’s incumbent on us to pay attention to presumptive President-elect Biden as he readies his plans for dealing with Iran’s nuclear weapons ambitions. If he plans to reverse Trump’s initiatives, we should be concerned. Reduced emphasis on strong sanctions would be foolish because they are working.

Finally, we can’t throw out the valuable progress made toward Mideast peace initiated by the agreement between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain. And there are realistic plans for more normalization of relations between Israel and other Arab countries. Isolating Iran in this way is the best safeguard against international terrorism and other transgressions of Iran. This progress must be preserved.

Rejoining the nuclear agreement with Iran is a priority for many democrats. But it would be like putting handcuffs back on the U.S. for brokering peace in the Mideast. Iran is a bad actor with terrorism and nuclear ambitions on its mind. Many flaws in the original agreement, along with Iran’s blatant cheating, are widely acknowledged. Let the terribly flawed Iran nuclear agreement remain dead.

There are many existential threats in our world, some probably at least as threatening as Iran. Yet the following thought comes to my mind more often about Iran than for any other threat: ***“This is the face of evil and the challenge of our time! History will judge us on how we deal with this existential threat to our country and to other countries as well!”***