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Iran - USA

The Iran Deal: Up, Down or Sideways?

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Even while the rhetoric around the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran seems to be reaching reactor-grade "critical" level, signs are emerging that the fix just may be quietly in. [1]

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, after lining up his entire 54-member majority to vote down the agreement, states that it's "quite likely" that the presidential veto of the disapproval resolution will be upheld. This is the man, remember, who once announced that his political agenda revolved around "making Barack Obama a one-term President." Now it's as if he's pleading with the Democrats: It's up to you to round up 34 of your Senators to uphold the veto and keep us from all going over the cliff.

A sophisticated Israeli analyst, Uri Savir, writes that it's time for Tel Aviv to give up on blowing up the deal and develop new security understandings with regional Arab states ("Rethinking the Middle East's Nuclear Balance," *al-Monitor.com*, posted August 16). And when the founding president of United Against Nuclear Iran, nuclear weapons expert Gary Samore, resigns with a statement that he finds the deal better than anyone could have expected, it looks like rational thinking may be blowing in the wind.

Then again, this is America, the land of the Crack Brothers and AIPAC and Sheldon Adelson and 17 Republican presidential candidates in an election that's only 14 months away - one Super Bowl, one NBA Finals and two World Series from now.

Let's try to unpack the real from the rhetorical and the ridiculous in the raging political fight around the agreement. In particular, what are its loudest opponents actually defending?

What the Deal Does

As suggested above, the deal to drastically reduce Iran's nuclear development programs and remove sanctions reflects "rational thinking" among all the parties. That's not quite the same thing as "progressive thinking," even though every liberal and progressive-leaning force in the land is understandably throwing itself into lobbying Congressional Democrats to uphold it.

This is a deal among four imperialist states - the United States, Britain, France and Germany; two emerging or aspiring ones, Russia and China (depending on your definition of imperialism); and Iran, ruled by a theocratic-military partnership. It reflects a convergence of interests among the dominant elites and ruling classes of these states, amidst all their other conflicts and brutalities, recognizing that this deal is better than the alternative of sliding toward a U.S.-Iran war.

Underlying the agreement is the emergence of a new Middle East reality. If this language seems detached and bloodless, let's never forget all the immediate horrors of the region. These are the lands of the Syrian regime's hundred Guernicas, of the genocidal and mass rape cult called the "Islamic State," of Yemen's state meltdown and mass child starvation, the crushing of Egypt's democracy and the hopes of the Arab Spring, of U.S. drone strikes and bombings that rarely fail to make the most appalling situations even worse, of refugees fleeing by the millions for dubious safety on European shores.

The agreement with Iran solves none of these, nor does it bring justice for the Palestinian people any closer, or any promise for internal reforms in Iran or anywhere else, let alone a nuclear-free Middle East - although to be sure, defeating it would surely make the regional wars, the repression in Iran and the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation much worse. What then does it actually mean, and what's at stake in the political war around it?

1) The P5+1 deal with Iran at bottom reflects an emerging U.S.-led strategy - which Russia and China would also see in their state interests - to "stabilize" the mess that imperialism created in the Middle East. The big change: Israel will be an important but no longer the absolutely primary U.S. strategic ally. Instead, it's now necessary to develop a multilateral set of tactical and strategic balances that will include Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, along with Israel as first-but-not-only partner.

2) The essence of the fight is that "pro-Israel" hawks reject this multilateral strategy and insist on maintaining Israel-uber-alles. It's not about an Iranian military threat to Israel, which is nonexistent regardless of Iran's nuclear status. (If anything, it's the Saudis who have more serious real concerns about Iran.) Iran's nuclear weapons contingency plan was developed against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which invaded Iran with U.S. encouragement in the 1980s. Tehran was prepared for a grand bargain with the United States after the U.S., invasion toppled Saddam in 2003 - an opening that the Cheney-Bush gang arrogantly refused.

Senator Charles Schumer's statement of opposition to the deal is revealing in this regard. Obviously, his pledge not "to be affected by politics or party" was never to be taken seriously. Further, he's certainly smart enough to know that the Iranian mullahs' "Death to the Zionist entity" rallies - which draw visibly dwindling crowds of Iranians - are "for the goyim" (i.e. for the entertainment of the foolish and ignorant). Interestingly, Schumer concedes that the deal is acceptable in its early stages, but problematic down the road - a concession that Netanyahu's comical "weeks or months to the Iranian bomb" is drivel. It's the future, in which Israel's demands on the U.S. may no longer reign unquestionably supreme above other considerations, where his problem lies.

3) For the dead-end neoconservatives who supply the ideology for the AIPAC wing of the Israel Lobby, and for the entrenched bureaucracies of major U.S. Jewish organizations, the main threat is the diminution of their own power in the new Middle East policy dispensation. Ever since 1967, a cohort of intellectuals attaching themselves to the project of American power ruling the world - many but by no means all Jewish, and many but not all ex-liberals - have derived considerable influence as bridges between U.S. and Israeli military, political and economic power elites.

It's not Israel's existence that's at stake here - the threat to its future lies in its own internal rapidly deteriorating politics and creeping social disaster, but that's another whole story. The fury of AIPAC and allied organizations is a rearguard defense of themselves, their unparalleled access to the halls of power and their capacity to bully and intimidate dissident politicians. That helps explain why they are doubling down on trying to kill the Iran deal - even when Jewish Americans favor the deal in higher proportions than the overall U.S. population.

What if it Fails?

4) In view of the consequences of a congressional overturn of the agreement (a 2/3 veto override in both House and Senate), such an outcome seems almost unthinkable. Presumably, votes are being carefully calculated to allow some Democrats to vote against it without actually killing the deal. I think it can also be predicted that if the deal is upheld, the Republican candidates' current pronouncements that they'd cancel it are the hot air of August before the primaries. But we do need to think about what a rejection would mean.

5) An overturn of the deal by Congress would obviously cripple this administration's foreign policy for the rest of its

term, and possibly the next one. It might conceivably wreck the final Trans Pacific Partnership negotiations, where the U.S. is going up against all the other TPP countries in its crusade to protect the monopoly super-profits of Big Pharma. A president desperately trying to save his remaining "legacy" deal will not be in a strong position to arm-wrestle the rest of the world.

As Obama and Kerry are warning, most likely the Russians, Chinese and ultimately Europeans would walk away from the global sanctions on Iran - whether overtly or unofficially. Why bother with a U.S. administration that couldn't even get support from one-third of its Congress?

6) The enormous reservoir of popular pro-U.S. feeling in Iran would take a huge hit. Iranian "hardliners," mainly the Revolutionary Guard elements who control much of the economy and have become rich because of the sanctions, would rejoice. It might be effectively curtains for Rouhani's presidency.

7) The defeat of the Iran deal would hugely expand the already significant split in the U.S. Jewish community. Furthermore, while the power of the Israel Lobby in U.S. politics would be enhanced at least in the short term, the global picture would be quite different. The raging opponents of the agreement can't all be stupid enough (though some surely are) to fail to recognize this: Internationally, this could be Israel's all-time biggest political disaster.

The crippling of U.S. Middle East policy would entail huge damage to its capacity and perhaps willingness to continue defending Israel's outrageous actions in Palestine. There would likely be a vast mushrooming of BDS globally, including possible European sanctions against Israeli banks that are already threatened. How much of its remaining credibility would the Obama administration want to expend in protecting Israel from the consequences of wrecking such a strategically critical deal?

What Will Netanyahu Do?

8) How the Israeli government might respond to a defeat, or the more likely near-defeat of the agreement - what Netanyahu calls "resounding moral majority" against it - is speculative and as always dependent on internal political considerations. What's certain is that Israel will demand even more U.S. military aid, and almost surely get it as a consolation prize (and a way for Obama to buy a few Congressional votes).

A unilateral military attack on Iran is out of the question - Israeli generals know it's crazy - but there might be the possibility (for example) of resuming Israeli assassinations of Iranian scientists as a provocation, in the hopes of getting an Iranian retaliation that would give Israel a pretext for escalation.

If Netanyahu wants to go for some kind of new war (in Gaza or Lebanon or whatever), I assume he couldn't really do it from his current tiny majority with barely 61 Knesset seats, but would need to bring in either the "Zionist Union" (Herzog) or the fascist Avigdor Lieberman into his coalition - or both. Just in case anyone had illusions about Herzog representing a positive alternative, he's openly and literally embraced Netanyahu in condemning the deal.

9) One must wonder if the Republicans and AIPAC really want to "win" this fight, aside from those for whom destroying Obama supersedes any other goal. With the Middle East already in flames with so many victims trying to escape, this president's chances (and probably the next one's) of pulling off any measure of political-military success in Iraq or Syria - which depend on at least tactical cooperation with Iran and coordination with Russia - would be almost nil. Is this what the Republican candidates seriously want to inherit? Do even the craziest-talking among them want to be taking on Iran, ISIS and maybe the Syrian regime at the same time, with no allies?

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As Uri Savir reports "a senior member of AIPAC's political leadership" saying on condition of anonymity: "We have decided to go all-out on the issue, despite this being a partisan cause...Secretly, some of us pray not to succeed in this battle." ("AIPAC Chooses Sides: Picks Bibi Over Own Supporters, U.S. Jews," al-Monitor.com, posted August 2, 2015)

In short, for so many reasons it's hard to contemplate an actual 2/3 congressional vote to kill the deal. It's just that in this crazy-ass country, you can never know for sure.

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[1] For some background see <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4058>