

Doing the Nuclear Dance: The Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

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“We will have just enough centrifuges to make carrot juice.” – Alireza Mataji, Twitter, Apr 3, 2015

It did finally arrive, though any chat about “framework” is bound to require a closer look at the fillings, strength of timber and assortment of various measures of quality. It did take upwards of eighteen months and the work of Tehran with the 5+1 Group (US, Britain, France, Russia China plus Germany), yielding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Such a framework was always going to be problematic. Everything has to begin with a dominant premise, in this case that one nation state could not be allowed a nuclear weapon, while others, generally speaking, are allowed to continue their merry way modernising, refining and doing what is deemed necessary to keep a fictional deterrent alive. This fudging came with the issue that is so fundamental to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation slow dance: you do not get to use nuclear energy as long as you focus on peaceful uses. Doing so entails assistance, encouragement and inspection. Not doing so suggests usurpation and a brattish disposition.

In attempting to strangle the Iranian program, the use of sanctions was always going to be the beating incentive. Easing them, or lifting them altogether, was not so much an olive branch as a coated stick. The agreement ensures that EU sanctions on matters nuclear-related and financial will be terminated. The US guarantees to cease its secondary economic and financial sanctions of a nuclear related nature, linking it to International Atomic Energy Agency verification of Iran’s undertakings.

The framework agreement sees Iran agreeing to cut its centrifuge supply by two-thirds (19,000 to about 6,000). The reduction of the existing stockpile of enriched uranium by 97 percent is also in the deal, as is a promise to continue enrichment at levels far less than those required to make a nuclear weapon.

As the joint statement by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif outlined, “As Iran pursues a peaceful nuclear program, Iran’s enrichment capacity, enrichment level and stockpile will be limited for specific durations, and there will be no other enrichment facility than Natanz. Iran’s research and development on centrifuges will be carried out on a scope and schedule to be mutually agreed.”[1]

There are specific outlines regarding the conversion of Fordow from an enrichment site to that of a “nuclear, physics and technology centre.” Fissile material will be prohibited at

Fordow, while Iran will be assisted in “redesigning and rebuilding a modernised Heavy Water Research Reactor in Arak that will not produce weapons grade plutonium.” According to Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani, “we have both maintenance of nuclear rights and removal of sanctions alongside constructive interaction with the world.”

The ultimate issue lurking in the background is persistent anxiety and terror. The nuclear weapon, horrifying as it is, is a grotesquery that has been normalised. The use of atomic weapons signalled normalisation – the distortion, rather, has come from the preventive measures of powers who have obtained treasures they would rather others did not have. The gap is supplied by a wilful cultural myopia: some are better to have it than others. The very existence of the nuclear weapon obliterates such distinctions – it is either possessed, or not.

The nuclear exception, however, makes it imperative that a state like Iran must give undertakings that “enrichment and all nuclear-related technologies are only aimed at Iran’s development and will not be used against any other countries” while other nuclear states, including those not within the NNPT regime, are entitled to ignore such otherwise pie-in-sky assertions. They know that once the weapon is obtained, it will not be relinquished.

The language of nuclear diplomacy is also constraining. Agreements may well be reached, but selling them like decent products with a viable historical warranty is something else. “This is very complicated,” claimed an unnamed senior Obama administration official to *Politico*.^[2] “A lot of this is hard to talk about to the American people.” There are senators in Congress in open opposition, promising every stonewalling trick in the book. There are lobby groups with deep pockets keen to see this deal collapse.

Senior Israeli journalist Ari Shavit has gotten on the cataclysmic bandwagon, viewing the deal as an error “as big” as George W. Bush’s disastrous gambit in Iraq. He sees the normalisation of Iran’s ambitions as triggering a potential “multi-player nuclear arena” in the Middle East. “If Iran goes nuclear, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and the Gulf states will go nuclear.”^[3]

This form of calculation has a certain crude merit to it, though it allows Israel to remain the default nuclear state in a sea of Muslim state contenders, the grand non-Muslim balancing act against other perceived fanaticisms. The nub of the matter here is one that Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists upon with fanatical consistency: you can’t let the Mullahs get the bomb. For Shavit, “Does an agreement that allows Iran to keep 6,100 spinning centrifuges really lock under 1,000 locks and bolt behind 1,000 bolts the Iranian nuclear project?” The deal, in short, is hardly punitive enough.

The Iranian establishment will also have to be doing their local sell, convincing citizens that their government hasn’t been doing just that little bit of a sell-out. The hard-liners, quiet through the negotiations, may see a chance to strengthen their hold. On the surface, this remains a “nuclear program”.

In practice, it is also a concession to the dictating agendas of other powers – the dangerous game being played in the powder keg playground of the world. “No matter how we try to sugar coat it,” argues economist Saeed Laylaz, who has ties with the Rouhani government, “this means we no longer will have an industrial-scale enrichment program. This is the price we have to pay for earlier mistakes.”^[4] Nuclear weapons remain forms of sovereignty, even if they are absurdly dangerous.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150402_03_en.htm

[2] http://www.politico.com/story/2015/04/obama-iran-deal-congress-116483.html?hp=t3_r

[3] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/iran-is-the-next-iraq-ari-shavit--116639.html#.VSCT1zAyZ8E>

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/04/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal.html>

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