

Iran and Nuclear Non-proliferation. The only Nuclear-armed State in the Middle East is Israel

Iran Talks Still Offer an Opportunity That Some Resist Desperately

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Global Research, November 22, 2013

[Reader Supported News and Global Research](#)

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Nuclear-armed states don't want Iran in their club

Over the weekend of November 9, the progress of multi-national talks with Iran abruptly paused after France surprised the other participants by raising public objections to a treaty text that remains secret. So now we have a possibly important moment in a long cycle of fearful futility that seemed almost broken.

This could be the moment when the intransigent few destroyed hope for bringing Iran, the world's most significant, scapegoated pariah nation, back into what passes for the international community, preferring to indulge their lust for war in all its unpredictable uselessness.

Or, more hopefully, this moment is only a pause, a slowing of the mutually desired normalization of Iran's presence in a world that already accepts states with much worse and more dangerous patterns of behavior. One thinks first of the United States and the destructive effect years of American actions continue to have on three of Iran's closest neighbors, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

The geopolitical venue for these ongoing talks in Geneva is a group variously known in diplomatic lingo as the P5+1 or, especially in Europe, the E3+3. This group formed in June 2006, when the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council who all have nuclear weapons (United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, United States) and Germany joined to negotiate with Iran primarily over Iran's nuclear development activities. From 2006 to 2010, the Security Council has tried to control Iran by adopting six resolutions that imposed economic sanctions on Iran, the results of which haven't much satisfied anyone.

Supposedly the focus on Iran is intended to keep Iranians from developing nuclear weapons, which they don't have and have declared unequivocally that they aren't developing. For reasons rooted more in fear than fact, other governments choose to believe in a threat for which there is little persuasive evidence (an echo of the phantom certainty that Saddam Hussein had WMDs).

Why isn't calling Iran part of the "axis of evil" proof enough?

In February 2013, with a new, more activist U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, reaching out to Iran, the current round of talks began that month in Kazakhstan and continued at other

sites before moving to Geneva in October. For most of the year, the effort was largely pro forma. For more than a decade, rational progress had seemed impossible under U.S. President Bush (2001-2009) who called Iran part of an “axis of evil,” as well under Iranian President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) who said the U.S. had attacked itself on 9/11.

With the election this year of a new Iranian president, Hassan Rohani, who took office on August 4, rational, substantive dialogue again seemed at least a remote possibility, despite hardline opponents of accommodation in both the U.S. and Israel, and their allies, as well as Iran. In spite of resistance, it took only three months until the world was hearing optimistic reports of an agreement about to be reached in Geneva, even though the terms of that agreement were closely held.

And then the French broke the spell, as well as some of the secrecy, when foreign minister Laurent Fabius went public with demands that Iran stop certain activities, some of which are completely legal under international law. South Carolina’s Republican Senator Lindsay Graham went on CNN to gloat, “Thank God for France!” [Juan Cole’s Informed Comment](#) elaborated on this intervention, concluding:

“One thing France must keep in mind is that hawks in Washington actively want a war with Iran, and that if there is no agreement now, that war will be on the front burner if a Republican comes to power in 2017. Since the French opposed the Iraq War and have been traumatized by their participation in Afghanistan, presumably they don’t want to give the American Right such a luscious opportunity, which won’t in the end benefit French interests in the Middle East. [French President] Hollande may think he is standing up for France, but he might actually just be making himself subordinate to South Carolina and American arms dealers.”

Lindsay Graham represents a broad segment of the American right that openly longs for making war on Iran without being able to explain why any better than former [vice president Dick Cheney](#) did recently on a Sunday chat show when he more or less hoped that diplomacy would fail and “resort to military force” would become inevitable.

What makes continued negotiation a “failure”?

Echoing Cheney obliquely are American media like the New York Times. In coverage of the November 9 break in the talks, the Times had a headline that began [“TALKS WITH IRAN FAIL...”](#) which conveys a false impression of collapse that is echoed in the lede:

“Marathon talks between major powers and Iran failed on Sunday to produce a deal to freeze its nuclear program, puncturing days of feverish anticipation and underscoring how hard it will be to forge a lasting solution to Iran’s nuclear ambitions.”

In the next sentence, while calling the weekend talks “a last-ditch bargaining session,” the Times grudgingly managed to report that the talks would resume in ten days “albeit at a lower level.” The remainder of the lengthy report maintained the gloomy undertone while reminding readers that Israel had already bombed nuclear reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) and seemed ready to bomb something in Iran any time it felt the need. The suggested target was the heavy-water reactor that Iran has long had under construction (and is still a year or more from completion) near the city of Arak. The Times explained that

Israel should attack Arak soon, before it was loaded with nuclear fuel, after which blowing it up would risk an environmental disaster. The Times did not mention that the heavy-water reactor is legal under international law, specifically the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (ratified by Iran and the U.S. in 1970).

The only nuclear-armed state in the Middle East is Israel

The only state in the Middle East that has not signed the non-proliferation treaty is Israel, which is widely assumed to have a [nuclear weapons arsenal of 75 or more](#) warheads. Israel consistently refuses to sign the non-proliferation treaty, even after proliferation has been achieved, arguing that the treaty is contrary to Israel's security interests. Israel's nuclear weapons development was made possible in part by a nuclear reactor provided by France. Officially, Israel has said its nuclear program is "designed exclusively for peaceful purposes." But as a former chairman of Israel's Atomic Energy Commission observed, "There is no distinction between nuclear energy for peaceful purposes or warlike ones."

In September at the United Nations, Iranian President Rohani called on Israel to sign the non-proliferation treaty, a call that the 120 nations of the Non-Aligned Movement have been making for years, to no avail. Addressing the UN General Assembly, Rohani also [called for worldwide nuclear disarmament](#) (as reported in Haaretz):

"Hours ahead of a planned meeting between Iran and major powers on Thursday [September 26], Iranian President Hassan Rohani told the General Assembly that use of nuclear weapons is a 'crime against humanity' and called on Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"In a rare direct reference, Rohani said that 'Israel, the only non-party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in this region, should join thereto without any further delay,' according to AFP....

"Rohani said 'the world has waited too long for nuclear disarmament,' Al Jazeera cited him as saying, claiming that states with nuclear capabilities should take responsibility for phasing out nuclear weapons...."

Allowing open inspections is a sign of good faith

Rohani also referred to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the nuclear inspection agency with which Iran has had an uneasy relationship for years, saying that "all nuclear activities in the region should be subject to the IAEA comprehensive safeguards." The IAEA, charged with enforcing the non-proliferation treaty, signed a new [Joint Statement on Framework for Cooperation](#) with Iran on November 11 under which the parties agreed "to strengthen their cooperation and dialogue aimed at ensuring the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme through the resolution of all outstanding issues that have not already been resolved by the IAEA."

Rohani's call for IAEA inspection of "all nuclear activities in the region" clearly includes Israel which has never allowed the IAEA to inspect anything, and has no obligation to do so as a non-signer of the non-proliferation treaty. As long as Israel can sustain mortal fear of Iran's non-existent nuclear weapons, it's own nuclear arsenal is safe from serious international pressure. In this regard, Israel is a rogue state, so it's little wonder that Israel, and Israel's supporters, especially in the United States, appear committed to blocking any deal with Iran

other than substantial Iranian surrender to Israeli demands.

Whatever the shortcomings of Iran's cooperation with the IAEA, that agency has made numerous inspections and reports over the years none of which have demonstrated more than the potential for developing nuclear weapons that any nation with nuclear power has. This has been true for 60 years, since the Eisenhower administration in 1953 decided the Atoms for Peace program was a good idea and started handing out nuclear reactors to developing countries that included Pakistan and Iran. And for the next 25 years, the U.S. also supplied weapons-grade Uranium as fuel for these reactors, since the U.S. weapons program created a surplus of the stuff that had to go somewhere.

Nuclear non-proliferation is also form of restraint of trade

It wasn't until 1968 that the non-proliferation treaty was first signed, by which time Britain, France, and the Soviet Union all had nuclear weapons and India was close. Pakistan was also committed by then to developing its own deterrence to the Indian bomb, an arms race summarized by [Jeremy Bernstein in the New York Review of Books](#) for November 21. Bernstein, a noted American physicist, writes that India's first successful test in 1974 was due in great part to Canada, which provided a heavy water reactor that could run on low level natural Uranium, but which produced plenty of fissile Plutonium for a bomb.

The Iranian heavy water reactor near Arak was the focus of one of the French objections to the proposed treaty. In August the IAEA that Iran had not reported adequately on the reactor since 2006, which left the agency unable to say whether Iran had the capability of diverting Plutonium from the reactor for use in nuclear weapons. The November 11 Joint Statement from IAEA and Iran promises to resolve this issue, but does not set out a timetable for doing so. In a [blogpost the same day, Bernstein](#) outlined the basis for serious concern about this reactor (once running reliably, it could likely produce enough Plutonium for one or two bombs a year) and concluded:

"By going ahead with a heavy water reactor, Iran seems to be saying it is determined to have the capacity to produce plutonium—and leave open a path to making a bomb. But it is very difficult to read the real intentions of the Iranians. Perhaps the fact that real negotiations have begun offers some hope that a tragedy can be avoided."

"Real negotiations" is exactly the process Israel is determined to avoid. As news of a possible treaty signing broke, [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) reacted with unmitigated opposition and a veiled threat of military response: "This is a very bad deal and Israel utterly rejects it.... Israel will do everything it needs to do to defend itself and to defend the security of its people."

"What is being proposed now is a deal in which Iran retains all of that capacity [to build a nuclear weapon].... Not one centrifuge is dismantled; not one. Iran gets to keep tons of low enriched uranium," Netanyahu said a few days later, without acknowledging that those terms are well within what's allowed by the non-proliferation treaty.

The question is not what is familiar or easy, but what is worth the risk

In a global perspective, as well as a regional perspective, bringing Iran inside the tent of détente matters, which is why increasing international comity has so many enemies operating from a national or personal perspective. Israel has much to fear from a quiescent

Iran that can no longer be easily demonized, for then there will be fewer distractions from Israeli offenses to human rights standards. While Iran is hardly a paragon of democracy, it remains a far more democratic state than Saudi Arabia or Qatar or Kuwait, all of whose brutal governments the U.S. has supported, just as it once supported the brutal Iranian police state under the CIA-anointed Shah. The U.S. even went to war to restore Kuwaiti plutocracy.

For the moment, the congressional impulse to destroy any possibility of useful negotiation by imposing more sanctions on Iran is held in check by a handful of committee chairs in the Senate. But the pressure will build and the center has no strong tradition of holding.

With Kerry as Secretary of State, the United States appears, for the moment, prepared to play a more neutral and positive role in the Middle East than it has perhaps ever. Whether Kerry will maintain his current course and, more importantly, whether the president will support a policy that is more even-handed than reflexive genuflection to Israeli interests remains to be seen. It won't be easy.

There is no compelling reason not to give Iran time to work its way into the world's confidence. That would serve the common good, if not the special interests of fundamentalist ideologues on all sides. Soon enough we'll learn who is willing to abandon the familiar risk of imminent war for the unfamiliar promise of imminent peace.

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