

Iran: The United States Should Take the Threat of Military Force “Off the Table”

Interview with Stephen M. Walt

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Global Research, February 23, 2014

[Iran review](#)

The new openings in the relations between Iran and the international community following the election of moderate President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 presidential polls are indicative of the fact that the future of Iran’s nuclear standoff is bright and that there are hopes for a comprehensive and final solution that can bring the decade-long controversy to an end. There are difficulties on this path, as Iran and the six world powers (Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany) have started intensive and breathtaking negotiations for a comprehensive deal, but both sides have voiced their optimism and hope that the talks will be fruitful.

In order to discuss the ongoing talks between Iran and the P5+1 and the future of Iran’s nuclear program, Iran Review conducted an interview with Prof. Stephen M. Walt.

Stephen Walt is one of the world’s leading political scientists who has authored tens of academic and non-academic articles about Iran’s nuclear program as well as several books on the U.S. foreign policy, including the renowned book “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” he has co-written with his close friend and colleague John Mearsheimer.



Walt is a professor of international affairs at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. A vocal critic of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, he has long advocated for the rapprochement and improvement of mutual relations between Iran and the United States.

“Although some U.S. commentators like to think that the United States should get to decide for itself what other countries can do, I think the U.S. government understands that Iran has a right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes,” said Prof. Walt in an exclusive interview with Iran Review.

To discuss about the different aspects of Iran’s nuclear program, the ongoing talks between Iran and the six world powers and the prospects of Iran-U.S. relations in the light of the new diplomatic overtures by the Iranian government, Iran Review did an interview with Prof. Stephen M. Walt. What follows is the text of the interview.

Q: Throughout the past decade, the Iran-U.S. relations experienced a serious decline in such a way that in addition to the lack of diplomatic connections between the two countries, several rounds of unilateral and multilateral sanctions were imposed against Iran by the

United States. Here we can pose two questions. First, what have been the major reasons for the fluctuations and frequent ups and downs in the mutual relations? And second, what role has the Israeli lobby played in the deterioration of Iran-U.S. relations?

A: There have been significant conflicts of interest between the United States and Iran ever since the 1979 revolution and the Israel lobby is not responsible for them. Since the early 1990s, however, groups within the broader Israel lobby, and the Israeli government itself, have worked hard to dramatize the threat from Iran and to prevent any serious rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

Q: One of the reasons why the talks between Iran and the six world powers constantly reached a deadlock in the past decade is that the United States never distanced itself from the policy of regime change which a number of neo-conservative think tanks, intelligence and military officials and statesmen advocated. This means that Iran cannot be confident about a just negotiation with the United States based on mutual respect and on equal footing. Has this policy ever changed, at least in the Obama administration?

A: Although there are groups in the United States that still favor regime change, I do not think this is an active goal for the Obama administration, especially since the election of President Rouhani. I believe the administration is sincere about wanting a better relationship with Iran, but it remains to be seen if the two countries can work out the most serious issues that divide them.

Q: As you've noted in one of your articles, a group of the U.S. Congressmen have recently written a letter to President Obama, offering that the United States would not impose any new sanctions on Iran, and in return, Iran should give up its whole nuclear program. The suggestion sounds childish, because Iran is already under several rounds of unilateral and multilateral sanctions, and if there's going to be a deal on the nuclear program, the focus should be on the existing sanctions, not those which are not defined yet. With such an approach, does the U.S. Congress allow the government to reach a viable and comprehensive agreement with Iran?

A: The threat of new Congressional sanctions did not work, because the president, his advisors, and most of the American people realized that it would derail the negotiations before they got underway. I believe Congress would be willing to endorse a comprehensive deal, but it depends entirely on the specific terms. The question is: will Congress accept a deal that is also acceptable to Iran, and vice versa?

Q: Right; in one of your articles, you talked about China's nuclear program in the 1960s and that extremist U.S. politicians tried at that time to portray it as a threat to the world peace and security. China accessed nuclear weapons, but never attacked any country. Are the United States and Israel really afraid of a nuclear Iran? Isn't what troubles them the growth of Iran's economic - political power and influence?

A: Israel is definitely worried about a nuclear Iran, and so is the United States. I believe this fear is greatly exaggerated, however, because having a nuclear weapon would not make Iran a superpower and would not give it any significant leverage over the US, Israel, or

anyone else. And of course, any use of a nuclear weapon would be suicidal as well as immoral. Israel and the United States are also worried about Iran's long-term power potential, but that is a concern that is best addressed through sensible regional diplomacy.



Q: What's your assessment of the momentous phone call between the presidents of Iran and the United States on the final hours of Hassan Rouhani's trip to New York? Can this phone conversation melt the ice of diplomatic relations?

A: It was an important symbolic step, as it signaled the two sides willingness to talk to each other in a more-or-less normal fashion. But now the two sides have to add substance to symbolism.

Q: It was shortly after the phone conversation between the presidents of Iran and the United States that President Obama conferred with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and said that the military option is still on the table regarding Iran's nuclear case. He repeated the military threat several times afterwards. Aren't the recent diplomatic openings in the mutual relations between the two countries in contradiction with Mr. Obama's war threats against Iran?

A: I would not over-interpret anything that might have been said during this period. Saying that the military option is still "on the table" means very little, because the main emphasis is on diplomacy at present.

Q: How is it possible to dissolve this wishful American thinking that recognizing Iran's nuclear rights is a gift and award given to Iran by the United States? In your writings, you've argued that as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is entitled to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, so the United States would not be doing a favor to Iran by recognizing Iran's rights. If this thinking is corrected, then the United States would not negotiate while looking down at Iran with contempt, but rather will be seeking a realistic solution. What's your take on that?

A: Although some U.S. commentators like to think that the United States should get to decide for itself what other countries can do, I think the U.S. government understands that Iran has a right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Given past conflicts and mutual suspicions, however, the United States is seeking to ensure that the exercise of this right does not lead to Iran leaving the NPT at some future point and becoming a nuclear weapons state.

Q: Does the United States government have the sufficient authority and independence to ignore the voices of pro-war, hawkish interest groups and the Israeli lobby and come to the negotiating table with Iran based on mutual respect and with a peaceful approach? We constantly hear the U.S. politicians reaffirming their commitment to the security of Israel. Can such a commitment and moving toward normalizing ties with Iran come at once and next to each other?

A: These statements are partly a reflection of the political power of the Israel lobby; politicians say these things because they think it is to their advantage to sound strongly "pro-Israel." But there is no real contradiction between support for Israel and support for constructive diplomacy with Iran, leading to a comprehensive deal. Israel would in fact be safer if US-Iranian relations were better, and if there was a formal, multilateral agreement

that acknowledged Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear energy but also reassured everyone about the actual purpose and capabilities of Iran's program.

Q: The coming to power of a moderate and pro-reform government in Iran which has the backing and support of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is a great opportunity for the international community to solve Iran's nuclear program controversy, and draw it to a conclusion forever. The resolution of Iran's nuclear standoff can contribute to the regional and global peace and security, as well. How should the United States and its allies use this opportunity and react to the peace-loving calls of the Iranian nation and also obviate their challenges with Iran?

A: In my view, the United States and the rest of the P5+1 should take the threat of military force "off the table" and negotiate sensible limits to Iran's enrichment capabilities and its stockpile of enriched uranium, along with appropriate inspections and other safeguards. That is a first step, but an important one. It should then begin easing sanctions, encourage travel and tourism, and gradually welcome Iran back among the community of nations. It will also be necessary to discuss other contentious issues, including the tragedy in Syria and the continuing conflict in Afghanistan. In short, the United States should strive for a more "normal" relationship with Iran, even it is not especially warm or close, at least not yet.

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