

JANUARY 2015

Slow Thaw *Testing Possibilities for Cooperation with Iran After a Nuclear Deal*

POLICY BRIEF



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The prospect of a nuclear deal between the West and Iran has generated a robust debate about whether such an agreement might generate opportunities for U.S.-Iranian cooperation on a broader set of issues. Any deal will address only the Iranian nuclear proliferation threat; even if successful, it will leave on the table many other unresolved sources of tension that have hobbled U.S.-Iranian relations since the Islamic Revolution. The Obama administration has stressed that any deal regarding the “nuclear file” remains separate and distinct from the overall question of U.S. policy toward Iran. The lead U.S. nuclear negotiator, Ambassador Wendy R. Sherman, stated this clearly: “engagement on one issue does not require and will not lead to silence on others.”¹ Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been equally insistent upon compartmentalizing and isolating the nuclear question from the broader U.S.-Iranian relationship.² But these negative statements do not determine what may happen in the days and years after an agreement.

To be sure, any thawing of the relationship would face tremendous challenges. The two countries have not had formal relations since 1979. In the decades since, successive U.S. administrations have designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism, and imposed sanctions based on a range of Iran’s activities apart from its nuclear proliferation. Both sides harbor long lists of grievances. Iran resents American support for the Shah and for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. The United States remembers the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and Iranian support for militants in Iraq. Resentments on both sides mean that powerful resistance in both political systems would oppose cooperation. Moreover, Israeli and Gulf partners, whose cooperation is vital for the achievement of other U.S. interests in the region, are likely to oppose any increase in U.S.-Iranian cooperation.

Despite the challenges, however, there are a number of areas where Iranian interests align with those of the United States and its partners. Both have interests in maritime security and in the free flow of energy out of the Middle East. Both would prefer a stable Afghanistan with Taliban influence limited to the greatest extent possible. Both oppose the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and may be willing to work together against it.

This paper makes some assumptions about the final contours of a comprehensive nuclear agreement (recognizing that a nuclear deal is not assured), and then dives deeper into the obstacles and opportunities for U.S.-Iranian cooperation. The paper concludes by recommending that the United States pursue a patient, limited, and incremental approach for building cooperation with Iran after a nuclear agreement is reached, based on the following principles:

1. Keep the nuclear issue front and center.
2. Maintain, formalize and expand communications channels established during the nuclear talks.
3. Start small with issues that are less politically charged, such as maritime security and Afghanistan.
4. Focus on areas and issues where moderates and technocrats on both sides are likely to control the policy.
5. Limit initial engagement on ISIS to operational de-confliction, while avoiding any attempts at strategic cooperation; over the longer term, test whether increased cooperation may be possible, particularly in Iraq.
6. Be actively transparent with regional partners about U.S. efforts to improve cooperation with Iran.
7. Reassure regional partners, by being willing to provide additional military support, that their interests are not being undermined.

We conclude by noting that the aftermath of a nuclear agreement may offer unprecedented opportunities to begin a “slow thaw” after decades of animosity between Iran and the United States.

The Nuclear Issue and Sanctions

Prospects for increased cooperation between the United States and Iran depend primarily on resolution of the nuclear issue, which has been at the

heart of the confrontation since Iran’s nuclear program was revealed in 2002. We make the following assumptions about the likely contours of a nuclear deal:

- Iran and the P5+1 reach a comprehensive nuclear accord that provides significant and verifiable constraints on Iran’s known uranium enrichment and plutonium programs, but does not completely dismantle Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.³ As a result, Iran will be unable to “break out” using its declared facilities to develop nuclear weapons, but it will retain a latent capacity to do so.
- The constraints and special verification procedures under a final nuclear deal will be rigorous enough to ensure that Iran cannot covertly develop a nuclear weapon through a “sneak out.” These arrangements will be time-limited, expiring sometime after 2025. After the agreement “sunsets,” Iran will be treated as a normal party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- Energy, financial and other nuclear-related sanctions will be suspended or lifted in phases.

Whether the two parties can decide on this type of agreement by the June 2015 deadline set during the November 2014 talks in Vienna, or at some later point, remains to be seen. But the centrality of the nuclear issue limits possibilities for additional cooperation until an agreement is reached: a breakdown in talks would almost surely preclude cooperation on issues outside of the nuclear file.

Obstacles to Cooperation

Even if the P5+1 and Iran are able to reach an agreement on the nuclear issue, converting progress on the nuclear front into a broader détente will face a number of impediments. This section examines the primary challenges: conflicting interests with regard to Iran’s support for terrorism and its regional agenda; resistance within the Iranian

domestic political system; and concerns of U.S. regional partners, most notably Israel and Saudi Arabia.

CONTINUED AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

Even after a major breakthrough on the nuclear file, the United States and Iran would continue to have major disagreements. Most notably, Iran's support for terrorism and the destabilizing effect it has in numerous parts of the region would not stop. Tehran has longstanding ties with and has historically supported Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad regime in Syria, Shia militia and Islamist parties in Iraq, Palestinian militants, Shia opposition groups in Bahrain and Houthi Shia insurgents in Yemen. It is not clear that a nuclear agreement would change Iran's support for these groups, which primarily stems from its desire to exert influence in the region. Indeed, sanctions relief accompanying a final nuclear deal could release additional funds that Tehran could turn towards these areas.⁴

Early and aggressive attempts to cooperate with Iran against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria are unlikely to work.

U.S. sanctions related to Iran's human rights violations, its support for terrorism and its ballistic missile program will remain in place after a nuclear agreement. A number of Iran's key hard-line decision-makers on important foreign policy issues, particularly from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary and asymmetric warfare branch, the Quds Force and its leadership and key operators, are currently designated under U.S. law as a terrorist organization

for violations that are unrelated to the nuclear program, further limiting the potential for cooperation.⁵ Even the nuclear sanctions affected by the agreement will not be rolled back immediately, but incrementally over time as Iran complies with its commitments under the agreement. Thus any early cooperation after a nuclear deal would be unlikely except outside of these issue areas.

IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

If an agreement is reached, efforts by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to try to walk a very difficult tightrope could result in a disjointed foreign policy. On the one hand, if a final nuclear deal results in Iran's diplomatic reintegration into the international community and a significant improvement in the country's economy, this could provide President Hassan Rouhani and his pragmatic backers with substantial political momentum. Khamenei might, as a result, give Rouhani greater influence in areas of Iranian foreign policy beyond the nuclear program.⁶ On the other hand, Khamenei would also have to contend with a backlash from opponents of negotiations, as



Khamenei Reviewing IRGC Corps. Credit: Neareastpolicy.com

well as his own fears about increasing U.S. influence within Iran. The end result is most likely to be a disjointed and inconsistent foreign policy with the Rouhani camp in control of some arenas, while hardliners continue to drive policy in others.

The strong mandate that accompanied the beginning of Rouhani's term in August 2013 is increasingly challenged by hardliners who oppose his engagement with the West.⁷ On any given policy issue, popular support matters, but primarily Rouhani must sway the Supreme Leader. More often than not, Khamenei stays above the political fray, waiting to weigh in on controversial decisions until he has assessed the domestic power balance and the direction the political winds are blowing. However, his default position tends to be one of suspicion of the West.

Rouhani and his western-educated Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif currently "own" the nuclear portfolio and, to some extent, tentative efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states and Turkey. A win on the "nuclear file" might enable Rouhani and Zarif to convince Khamenei to give them greater autonomy and to begin to claw back additional aspects of Iranian foreign policy from the Revolutionary Guards. It is important to recognize, however, that such a shift in some areas of Iran's foreign policy orientation would not end the competition or rivalry between Iran and the United States (or the latter's regional allies). For Iran's pragmatists, a thaw would not result in capitulation or the abandonment of Iran's role as a revolutionary state. But improved lines of communication with Washington and regional states would permit pursuit of tactical cooperation and "win-win" compromises that could secure Iran's core interests while reducing international hostility.⁸

In other arenas, however, the Supreme Leader is

likely to continue to side with the hardliners within the IRGC who currently dominate Iran's foreign policy toward Bahrain, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and other regional hotspots.⁹ Opposition to a moderate (let alone a reformist) agenda at home and abroad is deep and entrenched within the Iranian system. Khamenei believes that Western engagement with Iran ultimately aims to weaken the Islamic Republic and to foment regime change. A final nuclear deal is unlikely to alter that view, and it could spark fresh fears. For example, even after the interim nuclear agreement was reached in Geneva in November 2013, Khamenei continued to describe the United States as the main threat to the Islamic Republic. Beyond the direct threat Khamenei perceives from U.S. actions, he is intensely worried about the prospect of "Westoxification": long-term corrosive effects on the core values underpinning the Iranian revolution and the regime's ideological legitimacy resulting from economic and political normalization with the United States and the West. It is likely, therefore, that on some issues Khamenei could react to a final nuclear deal by overcompensating, responding to hardliner concerns of an impending shift in Iran's orientation toward the West by increasing his support for the Revolutionary Guard as the vanguard of resistance at home and abroad.

ANXIETY OF REGIONAL PARTNERS

Any U.S. efforts to cooperate with Iran after a nuclear deal is reached will immediately worry America's closest partners in the Middle East, whose cooperation is still vital for achieving broader U.S. objectives of maintaining regional stability, countering terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and ensuring the free flow of energy resources. This will inevitably place constraints on any thaw between the United States and Iran: U.S. policymakers will have to balance how much our traditional allies might be willing to accept.



U.S. sailors from the U.S.S. Kidd embrace an Iranian fisherman after assisting his ship.
Credit: U.S. Navy, January 6, 2012, Flickr

Israel has long identified the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat. Israeli leaders – who for years have publicly demanded the complete dismantling of Iran’s nuclear fuel-cycle infrastructure – are likely to voice concern about the latent nuclear capabilities Iran is allowed to maintain. They will protest the sunset provisions of the likely agreement that will eventually allow Tehran to be treated as a “normal NPT state” and therefore legitimize Iran’s ramping up its capacity once the deal expires. A nuclear deal is likely to fuel Israeli concerns that the United States will use the resolution of the nuclear dispute to withdraw militarily from the Middle East. Many Israeli officials will be concerned that the removal of sanctions and the end of Iran’s diplomatic isolation will enable and embolden increases in Tehran’s support for militancy via its action network throughout the Middle East.

The prospect of a nuclear deal also stokes Saudi worries about Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, as well as Saudi fears of U.S. abandonment.¹⁰ The longstanding

...Any cooperation with Iran will have to be accompanied by extensive U.S. consultation with regional partners...

rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become even more intense in the context of the upheaval in the Middle East over the past few years, with Saudi-Iranian proxy struggles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen.¹¹ Riyadh worries about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran but, more than the Israelis, Saudi leaders view the nuclear issue within wider concerns regarding Iran’s ambitions in the region. The Saudis are deeply skeptical about Iranian motivations and actions throughout the Middle East.¹² For this reason, Riyadh has thus far rejected tentative offers of engagement by Rouhani and Zarif.¹³ At the same time, Saudi faith in U.S. security guarantees has deteriorated. A nuclear deal is likely to exacerbate these concerns.¹⁴

Potential Opportunities for Cooperation with Iran

Despite the obstacles outlined above, there are a number of issues affecting the Greater Middle East on which the United States and Iran share some overlapping interests that could be areas of increased cooperation. The section below outlines a number of those areas of overlapping interests, starting with the more promising and moving towards those where cooperation will be more difficult.

MARITIME SECURITY

Both Iran and the United States have interests in avoiding naval accidents and unintentional escalation in the Gulf and North Arabian seas; both countries’ navies operate there, along with

The two areas ripest for cooperation are maritime security and Afghanistan.

the Iranian coast guard and IRGC-Navy.¹⁵ In order to manage future crises, the two countries could negotiate an Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreement similar to the one the United States had with the Soviet navy during the Cold War.¹⁶ If a comprehensive agreement is too ambitious, the two sides could at least establish a hotline for basic communication in the event of an incident or crisis. Perhaps the biggest challenge to this approach is that the area where incidents are most likely to occur is in the very crowded waters of the Gulf controlled by the IRGC-Navy, which would be less likely to be open to this type of cooperation than the more professionalized regular Iranian Navy.¹⁷

Taking measures to de-escalate tensions and to prevent any accidents from escalating into a shooting war in the Gulf furthers both U.S. and Gulf nations' interests. Such an agreement would not eliminate the possibility for such incidents, nor would it obviate the need to prepare for intentional provocations, but it would establish common rules of the road as well as military communications channels that could be used in a crisis.

Another potential area of cooperation is counter-piracy. Both the United States and Iran have an interest in ensuring the free flow of energy resources and commerce from the Middle East to Asia, Africa and across the globe. Iran's past participation in international counter-piracy efforts has not raised concerns from regional partners, and those efforts have provided an opportunity for Iran to play a constructive role in a broad coalition-based effort in the region of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf of Aden.¹⁸

Indeed, the counter-piracy campaign is one area of Iranian security policy where regime hardliners have empowered the regular Iranian navy.¹⁹ The U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, complimented the regular Iranian navy as "professional, courteous, and good mariners" for its active participation in anti-piracy patrols in 2012.²⁰

AFGHANISTAN

The most consequential recent example of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States came in Afghanistan after 2001, when Iran helped the United States topple the Taliban government and then participated in the Bonn Conference that resulted in Hamid Karzai's presidency.²¹ However, following George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech and the subsequent invasion of Iraq, that cooperation turned sour, as Iran grew increasingly concerned that the United States would stage attacks on Iran from Afghanistan.²² Since then, Iran has pursued a strategy of hedging its bets and maintaining influence by supporting various groups inside Afghanistan who are sometimes at odds with each other. At varying times, it has actively supported opposition to the Taliban, supported the Taliban, sought to expand its influence in Shia-majority areas such as Herat and supported various Afghan political and military leaders who have had contentious relationships with the national government in Kabul.²³ Its strongest historical relationships, however, are with the Tajik and Shia minorities who have traditionally aligned against the Taliban, and it supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban prior to the U.S. invasion in 2001.²⁴

One potential challenge is that the Iranian government has been a vocal critic of NATO's status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the Afghan government, a security arrangement that the Islamic Republic views as a potential threat in the event

of a wider armed conflict with the United States.²⁵ However, given the current plans for significant withdrawals, this matter should not cause significant strains between the United States and Iran.

On several other issues that affect the future stability of Afghanistan, the United States and Iran continue to pursue cooperation. These include containing the Taliban and promoting the general stability of Afghanistan by preventing return to a general state of civil war in the country.²⁶ Iran has joined the United States and other members of the international community in praising the 2014 formation of the Afghan unity government of President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah.²⁷ In spite of Iran's continued objection to the NATO SOFA with the Afghan government, it may see benefits from a small residual NATO force in support of Afghan security forces, which can help stabilize a conflict that has sent two million Afghan refugees into Iran.²⁸

Preventing the flow of heroin and other narcotics from Afghanistan into Iran and onto the global market is another potential area of cooperation. One of the most damaging contemporary social problems in Iran is addiction to opiates, particularly heroin, most of which enters the country from Afghanistan. Iran's moderate factions have generally taken the lead on their country's anti-narcotics policy, an issue on which they are supported by the hardline factions close to the Supreme Leader.³⁰

IRAQ

Beginning in 2003, the Iraq War helped enable the expansion of Iranian power throughout the Middle East, and particularly in Iraq, where today Iran has deep influence on the government and security forces. As ISIS makes gains throughout Iraq, the United States and Iran share overlapping interests in preventing the breakup of the country, averting civil war and defeating ISIS.³¹ Achieving

those goals requires both short-term and long-term efforts. In the short term, the United States and its partners in the coalition against ISIS are already fighting in operationally separate but strategically aligned campaigns. In some cases it appears that the Iraqi military has played the role of operational de-confliction as it reportedly did in December of 2014, when Iran launched airstrikes against ISIS over the Iraqi border.³² Both sides have ruled out cooperation before any nuclear deal, but basic operational coordination along the lines that helped oust the Taliban in Afghanistan might be possible once a nuclear deal is achieved.

However, long-term challenges are likely to exacerbate the differences between the two countries' respective visions for Iraq. The United States believes that the best approach for achieving long-term stability must come through inclusive governance that allows representation for Sunnis and Kurds, along with the Shia majority, while at the same time providing regions with some degree of autonomy. Iran, by contrast, has long viewed Iraq through the lens of the sectarian proxy wars in the region. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki embodied that view. His sectarian agenda, executed through authoritarian means, alienated the Sunnis and Kurds and created an environment conducive to the spread of ISIS into western Iraq and beyond. Concurrently, the IRGC Quds Force has used the Syrian conflict to build its action network of militias (primarily Shia), expanding it mostly with Iraqi Shia fighters.³³ This network has been redeployed in Iraq to help the Iraqi military and local militias, Shia and Sunni, to combat ISIS.³⁴ IRGC-supported Iraqi Shia parties and their adjutant militias are unlikely to continue to share political and social space in Iraq in the absence of significant pressure from the Iranian leadership.

Iran's acquiescence to Maliki's transition from power in favor of a new government headed by

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi demonstrates at least a tacit Iranian recognition that Maliki's continued rule was no longer feasible. Although no longer Iraqi Prime Minister, Maliki remains a powerful player on the scene; it is unclear whether, in the long run, his fellow Da'wa Party member Abadi will govern any more effectively or inclusively. It is also quite possible that the departure of Maliki from office did not fundamentally change Iraq's Shia-sectarian power structures: other key Iranian-backed Iraqi leaders, such as the Transportation Minister and senior Badr Movement leader Hadi al-Amiri, may now be more influential than ever.³⁵

A more cooperative, inclusive approach holds out better hope for resolving Iraq's fundamental governance issues, including the status of Kirkuk, distribution of oil revenues and minority rights. Ultimately, however, cooperation in Iraq will depend on Iran's decision about its vision for the country on its border. It faces a choice between a cohesive, stable, pluralistic state where it maintains significant – although not decisive – influence, or a fracturing state that serves as a hotbed for powerful Sunni jihadist groups, but one in which, due to its weakness and instability, Iran might have greater influence.

Another practical challenge for U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Iraq is that, for the foreseeable future, the Quds Force led by Qassem Soleimani will continue to dominate Iranian policy in Iraq.³⁶ It is highly unlikely that, even in the aftermath of a nuclear deal, Rouhani and Zarif could wrest control of this portfolio away from Soleimani, who has essentially run Iranian foreign policy in this arena since the U.S. invasion in 2003 and who remains very close to the Supreme Leader.³⁷ Although Soleimani is not an ideologue but a pragmatic hardliner, toughened by years of low-intensity conflict across the Middle East, it is hard to envision the United States developing a strong cooperative relationship with a man

whose support for Shia groups in Iraq bears responsibility for many American fatalities.³⁸

SYRIA

Of all the issues presented here, Syria will pose the greatest challenge for cooperation. There are potentially some areas of overlapping interests, but on others, Iran and the United States have been on opposing sides for years. Before the emergence of ISIS, Syria represented a fairly clear-cut proxy war between Iran (with the active support of Russia) and its client Assad regime on one side, and on the other, the Sunni Gulf partners of the United States. The emergence of ISIS – a threat to the interests of all parties – represents an opportunity for de-escalation and, potentially, cooperation. Together, both sides could push toward an end to the conflict by forcing a concerted pause in fighting, establishing local ceasefires and governance and then rolling those ceasefires into a political transition.³⁹

Iran could have an interest in achieving that level of cooperation due to the high cost of supporting the Assad regime. Iran has sent large amounts of money and significant numbers of its fighters, and has encouraged its regional proxies, including Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, to take up the fight in Syria. Those efforts have consumed vast resources at a time when sanctions have hit hard on Iran's domestic economy, and have also cost Iran dearly in terms of regional influence. The increasingly sectarian complexion of regional conflicts has undermined Iran's pan-Islamic bid for influence across the Middle East, including until recently splitting Hamas from Iran's camp.⁴⁰ Syria's civil war has also placed a costly burden on the IRGC and the Quds Force, which have been deployed to reinforce the Assad regime militarily by building a nation-wide National Defense Force militia network modeled after the IRGC's Basij paramilitary force.⁴¹ At least six senior Quds Force officers and as many as 60 operatives have reportedly been

killed in the Syrian conflict to date.⁴²

Although the Syrian conflict has been costly, Iranian hardliners, led by Soleimani who manages this portfolio, are likely to be hesitant to withdraw support from the Assad regime without significant security guarantees from the United States and its regional partners. Iranian military planners view their country's support of the Syrian and Iraqi militaries, and their adjutant paramilitary networks, as an essential line of defense against jihadist organizations like ISIS targeting the Iranian homeland.⁴³ IRGC commanders have gone so far as to describe their organization's participation in the Syrian conflict as a struggle akin to the "sacred defense" of Iran against Saddam Hussein's force during the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁴

The question of Hezbollah's future role in the conflict in Syria is likely to be a point of disagreement. Hezbollah sees itself not fighting in favor of an autocratic regime that represses its people, but rather fighting to defend the Lebanese and Syrian people against an international and regional conspiracy that poses an existential threat.⁴⁵ Even the relatively high cost of Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian conflict, with approximately 325–500 fighters killed in action, the severe pressures on the organization's resources, and direct attacks against the Shia community in Lebanon by militant Salafist groups, are not likely to end Hezbollah's willingness to participate in the Syrian civil war. Hezbollah views the rise of ISIS and similar groups to be an existential threat.⁴⁶ Thus, in the event that the Iranians accepted a post-conflict transitional governance period involving the replacement of Bashar al-Assad and top layers of his government, it would likely still be in Iran's interest to maintain Hezbollah's military presence in western Syria for as long as possible to ensure that Syrian actors hostile to Iran's interest do not come to power and to keep pressure on ISIS.



Nuclear negotiations in Vienna, July 14, 2014, at the negotiating table

Credit: U.S. Department of State

The potential for cooperation depends on a decision by Iran that keeping Assad in power and continuing the war is more costly than supporting a transitional process to end the war. For their part, the United States and regional partners will have to weigh the value of effectively confronting ISIS, ending the civil war and helping to ensure stability and an inclusive governance process in Syria, versus the potential for dealing a major blow to Iranian power in the region by toppling its main Arab ally.

Recommendations

To address the potential obstacles and pursue the opportunities outlined above, policymakers in the United States, along with P5+1 and regional partners, should pursue a patient, limited and incremental approach to other issue areas. These recommendations are based on realistic expectations for possible cooperation with Iran, given the long history of conflict between the United States and Iran, the realities of Iranian domestic politics and the likely concerns of regional partners. Timing will also be a difficult challenge: policymakers should move quickly in order to build on

the momentum of an agreement, but not so quickly as to raise the suspicions of either the Supreme Leader, who will have concerns that a deal is leading to the “Westoxification” of Iran, or U.S. regional partners, who will be concerned about the possibility of a new U.S.-Iran alliance that undermines their regional interests.

1. KEEP THE NUCLEAR ISSUE FRONT AND CENTER.

Policymakers should make every effort to emphasize, both with actions and words, the continued compartmentalization of the nuclear issue. This will signal to Iranian decision-makers that other issues – including the fight against ISIS – will not lower P5+1 demands for a nuclear deal and will maintain incentives for Iranian leaders to make the necessary concessions to achieve a deal. Once the parties agree to a deal, that will be only the first step; both sides must faithfully implement the agreement. The P5+1 must be prepared to respond should Iran renege on its agreements. At the same time, the international community must ensure that relief of sanctions follows in accordance with the agreed parameters of the deal; such relief will be essential for Rouhani to reap the economic and political benefits domestically. This remains true even though removal of nuclear sanctions could provide Iran with a cash windfall that it could use to support militancy in the region. Policymakers must accept this reality as an unavoidable tradeoff, even as they continue to fight the militancy with targeted sanctions and other tools.

For the first time since the Islamic Revolution, there is regular communication between a U.S. Secretary of State and his Iranian counterpart.

2. MAINTAIN, FORMALIZE AND EXPAND COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS ESTABLISHED DURING THE NUCLEAR TALKS.

One of the biggest challenges to cooperation with Iran has been that, because the United States has not had diplomatic relations with Iran since 1979, clear communications have been extremely difficult. The absence of communications channels has presented tremendous logistical hurdles; when the two sides have wanted to exchange messages, they have had to use go-betweens such as the Sultan of Oman, or the Swiss, who formally represent U.S. interests in Tehran. This game of “telephone” reduces the ability to understand each other, especially when the go-betweens have their own agendas, which usually do not align perfectly with those of the United States or Iran. The nuclear negotiations have now opened up channels at the highest levels for the first time in 35 years. For the first time since the Islamic Revolution, there is regular communication between a U.S. Secretary of State and his Iranian counterpart. Such communication at the highest levels should continue after a deal is agreed; the United States should also work with Iran to expand on those channels at professional levels. The U.S. no-contact policy has required any U.S. personnel to seek a special high-level exemption before interacting with their Iranian counterparts.⁴⁷ This policy, which remained in place during the nuclear negotiations, meant that American and Iranian diplomats, whose job it is to build relationships with their foreign counterparts and look for common areas of cooperation, could not even talk to each other when attending the same international conferences or events. The United States should gradually lift and eventually fully eliminate the no-contact policy. Iran and the United States should also seek ways to expand military-to-military communications to enhance their ability to de-conflict operations and to avert unintended escalation, especially for the countries’ respective navies in the Gulf and their

air forces operating in Iraq.⁴⁸ A nuclear deal offers the ideal time to pick up on the positive momentum and take this crucial step. However, U.S. policymakers will have to be careful not to move too aggressively, as that could raise suspicions by hardliners in Iran, leading to their rejection of mutual steps towards progress.

3. START SMALL WITH ISSUES THAT ARE LESS POLITICALLY CHARGED AND WHERE U.S. AND IRANIAN INTERESTS MOST ALIGN, SUCH AS MARITIME SECURITY AND AFGHANISTAN.

The two areas ripest for cooperation are maritime security and Afghanistan. On maritime security, both states should be able to work together to avoid inadvertent escalation in the Gulf, which could be highly damaging for the interests of both. Iran could also be better incorporated into the international counter-piracy task forces that operate outside of the Gulf. On Afghanistan, the United States and Iran have already cooperated in the past and both have interests in limiting Taliban influence. Iran's biggest difference with the United States was over its fear that a large number of American forces would be permanently based in Afghanistan, but the current drawdown should largely assuage those concerns. Working together to stem the flow of opium from Afghanistan into Iran, which then becomes a transit point to Europe and the Middle East, is certainly an apolitical and technical matter on which all sides can cooperate. Another major benefit for both of these areas of cooperation is that neither is likely to upset Saudi Arabia or Israel, since neither of these arenas are forums for Saudi-Iranian or Israeli-Iranian competition.

4. FOCUS ON ISSUES WHERE MODERATES AND TECHNOCRATS ON BOTH SIDES ARE LIKELY TO CONTROL POLICY.

Following a nuclear agreement, U.S. policymakers will have to observe Iranian domestic politics carefully, looking for specific areas where Rouhani and Zarif appear to be winning the internal battles and

seizing greater control over policy. When American policymakers are able to identify those areas, they should focus on them first. Afghanistan and maritime security are likely to be in that category, given that they are not politically sensitive inside Iran. It is possible that Rouhani and Zarif may also be able to wrest control of the Saudi Arabia and Turkey portfolios and begin to improve relations with those two states, which the United States should encourage.⁴⁹ However, the hardliners are likely to remain firmly in control of Syria and Iraq policy, making those areas less promising for cooperation.

5. LIMIT INITIAL ENGAGEMENT ON ISIS TO OPERATIONAL DE-CONFLICTION, WHILE AVOIDING ANY ATTEMPTS AT STRATEGIC COOPERATION; OVER THE LONGER TERM, TEST WHETHER INCREASED COOPERATION MAY BE POSSIBLE, PARTICULARLY IN IRAQ.

Early and aggressive attempts to cooperate with Iran against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria are unlikely to work, given that the Quds Force will likely continue to control these portfolios. Such action would also lead to significant regional blowback, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who view the conflicts in Iraq and Syria as part of a regional competition with Iran. Therefore, the best that is achievable in the short term is probably tactical coordination of operations to avoid inadvertent conflict and ensure that American and Iranian efforts against ISIS are mutually reinforcing. After some time, it may be possible to begin a dialogue with Iran on the future of Iraq. If the Iranians are willing to move from an approach that is exclusively sectarian-based, and to acknowledge that long-term stability in Iraq will require an inclusive political process, then deeper cooperation is possible, but if they continue to push for an exclusive Shia victory, U.S. and Iranian strategic interests will not align. There may be opportunities over time to de-escalate the conflict in Syria, but only if Iran decides that the price of keeping Assad in power and continuing the war is greater than the price of

supporting a transitional process to end the war. Such a shift in Iranian policy is unlikely as long as Qassem Soleimani and IRGC hardliners continue to lead Iranian efforts in Syria.

6. BE ACTIVELY TRANSPARENT WITH REGIONAL PARTNERS ABOUT U.S. EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COOPERATION WITH IRAN.

Progress on cooperation with Iran need not – and will not – come at the expense of regional partners. The benefits of increased cooperation could be significant, but seizing those opportunities could also feed anxieties in Israel and the Gulf that the United States is acquiescing to Iranian hegemony or planning a fundamental reorientation of Washington’s geopolitical alignments. At the very least, any cooperation with Iran will have to be accompanied by extensive U.S. consultation with regional partners and paired with efforts in other areas to push back against Iran’s destabilizing activities. It may also necessitate creating regional security forums in which U.S. and Iranian discussions are nested within multilateral dialogues involving other regional stakeholders.

7. REASSURE REGIONAL PARTNERS, BY BEING WILLING TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL MILITARY SUPPORT, THAT THEIR INTERESTS ARE NOT BEING UNDERMINED.

Following a nuclear agreement, there will be a significant need to deepen security cooperation with traditional allies to reassure them of America’s enduring commitment. In the case of Israel, this could come in the form of additional transfers of cutting-edge military systems as “compensation” for Israeli acceptance of a nuclear deal with Iran, and deepening military and intelligence cooperation against Iranian proxies. In the Gulf, it likely will mean maintaining the U.S. presence and redoubling U.S. efforts to build up the defense capabilities of Gulf partners, as well as the ability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to operate as a collective security organization to counterbalance

a resurgent Iran. Given the possibility of continued U.S.-Iranian rivalry and the heightened post-deal anxieties of Washington’s regional allies, the United States will most likely not be able to leverage a nuclear deal with Iran to effect a substantial reduction in its military commitments to the Middle East. Any shift toward reducing the U.S. presence in the Gulf in the immediate aftermath of a deal could feed perceptions of regional abandonment, leading allies to take “self-help” actions that could worsen regional tensions and run counter to U.S. interests. Policymakers should take great pains to communicate the long-term and steady U.S. commitment to the region, exemplified by the growth in U.S. forces based in the region even after the withdrawal of U.S. war-fighting troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Thirty-five years of animosity between the United States and Iran will not simply melt away even if Iran and the West can strike a nuclear deal. Resolution of the nuclear issue alone cannot untangle the violent web of politics in the Middle East. Significant resistance to increased cooperation with the United States will continue to be a central element of Iranian politics. Regional allies will remain wary of Iran either way. However, a deal that truly resolves the nuclear issue can be a foundation for progress. In the immediate aftermath of an agreement, the United States should pursue a patient, limited and incremental approach. Over time this policy can expand and eventually move Iran and the United States towards a much more normal relationship in which the two states can work together on issues of common interest, even as they continue to compete where their interests diverge. Such an outcome could truly improve the regional security environment of the Middle East. Iran’s decision to address the international community’s concerns about its nuclear program must be the first step.

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Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank Dr. Dafna H. Rand and Elizabeth Rosenberg for their comments on substance and structure, as well as Amanda Claypool for her research assistance.

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Cover Photo: Iranian missile at a military parade in Tehran

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