

Moving on After Congress Votes on the Iran Deal

Written by Matthew S. Cohen

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MATTHEW S. COHEN, AUG 30 2015

There are many proponents and opponents of the Iran nuclear deal can, and have, said regarding its strengths and weaknesses. Each side attempts to persuasively argue in favor of their viewpoint. However, what has not been meaningfully discussed is what comes the day after the US Congressional vote. Whether or not the deal with Iran results in a 'good' deal for the US, Israel, or the rest of the world, it is now essentially a fact, and it is already impacting international relationships. All the other signatories are moving ahead. It is time for the US and Israel to move ahead, too. The current battle between the leaders of both nations and between Congress and the President serves no one's interests. In fact, it delays meaningful planning for the future. The deal has many strengths. At best it will block Iran from building nuclear weapons, for now. At worst it should at least slow their progress. There are, however, clearly many ways the agreement could and should have been better, including implementing an effective rather than a faulty inspections regime. However, in the end, the deal is already here and it is not currently going to undergo major modifications. The international community has already embraced it, and it has been endorsed by the UN. There is little Congress can do to stop it. Congress' power to block the deal, even in the US, is limited as the agreement is not a treaty. Congress has no direct power to affect the actions of other signatories. In the end Congress can embarrass the President and criticize the Secretary of State, not alter the agreement.

For its part, there is even less Israel can do. Israel is rightly concerned about many aspects of the agreement, and views Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat. Despite this, Israel was not a party to the negotiations, had no ability to block its approval in the UN, and cannot force the US or any signatory to change policies. While Israel can state its opinion and attempt to convince Congress to oppose the deal, even if successful, as noted, it will not change the practical outcome. Israel instead risks further alienating the leaders of its most important ally. The world has spoken, and the re-imposition of worldwide sanctions or the imposition of new pressures on Iran seems highly unlikely.

Supporters and opponents of the deal have made significant mistakes in the aftermath of its announcement. In the case of supporters in the US, those mistakes have occurred both internationally and domestically. Supporters do not appear to appreciate, and in fact often appears to dismiss, the concerns of America's allies, especially those in the Middle East. Concerns expressed by Israel have been brushed off as "wrong," and Israeli objections have been dismissed by claiming Israel would reject any deal. Instead of engaging critics respectfully at home or abroad, supporters have instead chosen to dismiss people with legitimate concerns as, essentially, warmongers, and engaged in fear mongering, including the patronizing suggestion that the only options are this particular deal or war. Such statements are demagoguery and harken back to the 'us or them' oversimplifications of the Cold War. The irrelevant claims that people opposing the deal are the same as those who pushed for war in Iraq is bombast and further alienates many American citizens and international allies. Even more troubling, supporters' rhetoric has veered into anti-Semitism from time to time, as most clearly evidenced by the despicable cartoon regarding Senator Schumer published in the Daily Kos. Supporters have done little to combat such comments, providing fuel for the fears opponents hold that their concerns are not even being considered. It is not clear exactly how supporters believe such accusations and aggressive positions will benefit the US moving forward.

For its part, Israel, which has taken a leading role in arguing against the deal, has needlessly and foolishly increased tensions with the US. While announcing opposition to the deal would certainly be acceptable, the way in which it has been done is counter-productive and provocative. Opponents in Israel nearly immediately rejected the deal,

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including calling it an “historic mistake,” while finding nothing worth praising. It also appears Israel rejected requests from the US for bilateral talks regarding how the US can help improve Israeli security in the wake of the deal. As with supporters’ actions, it is not clear what the overall strategy of opponents is. Even if the deal is derailed, more ill-will has been created between the administrations. While the American administration will change in a little over a year, opponents’ actions are angering many decision makers in Washington.

The two nations must end this pointless feuding and finger pointing, and supporters and opponents of the deal should both stop engaging in divisive name-calling and instead prepare themselves for what comes next. There is no inherent reason Congress should not vote on approval or disapproval of the deal, as long as it does not detract from planning for the future. As noted, the deal is not a binding treaty, and in the end, even binding treaties cannot fully control the behavior of states. States’ decisions to follow or ignore agreements depends not only on their initial intent but even more so on the changing interests, strengths and weaknesses of those who are party to the agreement. Iran has already begun to create side-deals regarding the agreement. The US and its allies could do the same if needed.

Right now, however, the most important issues for the US and Israel to consider are not ways to make the deal better on paper. Instead both nations should be discussing within their countries, with each other, and with other allies the best way in which they can protect their interests and security against any adverse consequences that might arise despite adherence to, or breach of, the deal, as well as how they can take advantage of the new opportunities the deal provides. The US should work to use this opening to improve its relations with Iran and try to reduce tensions in the Middle East. If possible, improving relations may make it possible to restrain Iran’s aggressive behavior in the Middle East and decrease its support for terrorist groups. For the US, the opening of the Iranian market to US commerce provides the chance to increase trade between the two states. Establishing such ties will be difficult, however, and the US should plan for how it can engage Iran to ensure trade deals actually take place. Other options for interaction, culturally and socially, beyond trade, are also possible. History shows that enemies can find common ground.

The US and Israel must also prepare for the dangers that may lie ahead. The most obvious danger, of course, is that Iran uses the deal as cover to advance its nuclear weapons program and then either suddenly announces it is abandoning the deal or simply tests a nuclear weapon. There is no reason to believe either nation has prepared for such a situation, and both would benefit from advanced planning with the other to develop an appropriate response, including the sharing of intelligence and determining criteria for a military option if necessary.

As has been noted by opponents of the deal, the end of sanctions, which is imminent, will provide an extremist Iranian regime that calls the US the “great Satan” and regularly threatens to destroy Israel with a large influx of money that will almost certainly be at least partially funneled to terrorist organizations targeting Israel and the West. Iran has also already been a destabilizing influence in Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other nations. The newly obtained windfall from the lifting of sanctions could be used to strengthen Iran’s military and its ability to project power in the Middle East, thus increasing its ability to undermine US goals and the security of other countries in the region. These factors are in major part what are driving concerns from American allies in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others.

To address these problems the US needs to develop a comprehensive plan. Such a plan must include how the US will blunt Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria. Iran has looked to destabilize Iraq, and the US must be prepared to assist Iraq diplomatically and to help the Iraqi and Kurdish militaries defend the country. The US must reach out to its regional allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt (despite the downgrade in relations over Egypt’s coup), and Jordan, far more effectively than it has thus far in order to reduce their fears. While inherently limited, and thus of limited value in swaying opinion, the US must offer security assurances. Such a strategy is even more limited in helping persuade Israel, which prefers to rely on its own abilities. The US must be willing and ready to provide increased military aid or allow for the increased sales of weapons to allies, where appropriate.

Israel must also plan for what comes next. Creating a comprehensive plan to enhance its security will require cooperation with the US. Differences of opinion are to be expected, but the current tensions are harmful to Israel’s

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interests. While US-Israeli military and intelligence cooperation has been fairly strong, both nations would benefit from improved and increased intelligence sharing regarding Iran's nuclear program. Israel should also look for an increase in military aid and support, and determine exactly which military programs and systems are most critical when dealing with the increased dangers from Iran. Israel must also prepare a plan for how to deal with the increased funding Iran will send to Hezbollah, which already has a massive rocket arsenal. Part of that plan must involve the US. Israel should seek increased funding and assistance in regards to its missile defense systems, the further development of which will benefit both nations.

An under-examined danger the world should prepare for is a possible increase in cyber-attacks from Iran. Iran has a fast growing cyber-program already, which would likely receive increased funding. Iranian spying on the US, Israel, and other nations is likely to increase. While not as headline grabbing a threat, the world must still be prepared for the damage Iran could cause in the cyber-realm, including, as it is suspected of doing in the past, against Saudi oil companies and financial and governmental networks in the US.

In the end, Congress will, and should, hold its vote on the Iran deal, but it is unlikely to be able to secure enough votes to overturn the deal, and even if it did, such an action would likely have a very limited impact. Congress should currently be discussing how to deal with the aftermath of the deal, and the US and Israeli administrations must do the same. The petty name-calling and squabbling from all sides must end. Any deal has flaws, and, as with most any deal, the agreement will not go smoothly. Nonetheless, if governments plan ahead and develop contingency plans, including actions nations can take on their own and actions they can take in conjunction with other states, the impact of such problems can be minimized or prevented. If they do not plan ahead, some very bad potential consequences may become all too real. Taking such steps seems like a far better use of time and energy than engaging in inter-personal squabbles and hyperbolic name-calling. Whether one likes the deal or not, Iran is an important country with an exceptional history and has the possibility of a bright future. The US should engage with Iran, thoughtfully, and with well-considered protections in place, while being sure to protect and reassure our allies. The world needs to plan and the US has a chance to control the future rather than react to it, but only if it engages in thoughtful deliberation and discussion.

About the author:

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