

Interview - Avner Golov

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, FEB 7 2016

Avner Golov is a Harry S. Truman Scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He is also a researcher at the Center for New American Security, and a research fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv University. In this interview, he answers questions about the US-Iran nuclear agreement and its implications for regional security.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Some very interesting research is being conducted in the field of deterrence studies. The end of the Cold War generated the discussion about whether deterrence theory- which was developed during the Cold War – can and should be embraced when facing new threats like rogue countries, terror organizations and cybernetic attacks. Today the intellectual discussion addresses the means to adjust the traditional premises of deterrence to contemporary threats, while understanding deterrence's limitations. This discussion requires an interdisciplinary approach which merges military, diplomacy, economics, psychology and technology. Today's deterrence research is so interesting for its scope.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

After moving to the US for my PhD studies, I realized that there is a big gap between the American perception of the Middle East and the Israeli one: the American view is shaped by a global perception who sees the ME as an important region, but one out of many; and the military option as one of many other policy alternatives. Moreover, the American security discourse is an outgrowth of national trauma of two costly wars in that ended in tremendous American frustration. The Israeli perspective is much narrower and it encompasses mainly regional interests, and military tools as almost the sole leverage Israel has over its enemies. Israel's security culture is deeply influenced by Jewish trauma – the holocaust, and the historic role of the State of Israel to ensure that this event does not happen again. The differences between the two perceptions yield interesting discussions about contemporary security challenges.

What are your thoughts on The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)?

This deal demonstrates the American shift: from seeking to solve the Iranian nuclear problem, to managing the problem (and some would claim to postpone the problem). The deal holds many risks: it allows Iran to virtually continue its research in nuclear-related areas, and after ten years to gradually translate it into a nuclear threshold state. The agreement does not seriously challenge the Iranian narrative about developing a peaceful nuclear program, and allow Iran to continue its misbehavior: supporting terrorism, promoting anti-west agenda and destabilizing the region, inter alia by supporting Assad in Syria. However, this agreement buys time and the US should use the time given wisely in order to be prepared for the next round and ensure that Iran will not acquire nuclear weapons while preventing a regional war.

The agreement will face significant challenges in the coming years as it premises a separation between Iranian policy in the nuclear realm and its policy in the non-nuclear one. This will put the next American president and the next

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Congress under tremendous pressure from both domestic and international actors. To what extent will the next administration adhere to the agreement? This is a question for the next president, thus, it remains to be seen.

Do you think it has already promoted a shift in U.S.-Iran relations?

I think all actors are waiting for the American elections. The two leaderships had a joint interest in making sure the first phase of the agreement completes: for the US – to show the agreement rolls back the Iranian nuclear program; and for Iran – to lift nuclear related international sanctions. However, there is a great battle inside the Iranian leadership in which the more radical forces headed by the IRGC have the upper hand, emboldened by the Supreme leader and the judiciary leadership. Therefore, a significant change is yet to occur.

Do you think this agreement enhances Iran's credibility and legitimacy on the world stage?

Absolutely, and even more important – this is what the Iranian regime understands, according to President Rouhani's public statements. The agreement does not challenge the Iranian narrative; it "launders" the Iranian nuclear program that violated international norms according to the UNSC, and seeks to bring Iran back to the international community despite its misbehavior.

Do you think it will change Iran's role in the region?

I think Iran's Sunni adversaries think it would – which is why they formed a counter coalition; I think Israel thinks it would – and Israeli PM states it publicly, and I think the Russians think it would – hence their feeling more comfortable cooperating with Iran after the agreement was signed.

I think this agreement renders war imminent rather than preventing it. Iran is emboldened by the agreement and can now push for a bolder regional policy. Iran's adversaries – some are US allies – are frightened by the Iranian policy and particularly by what they see as an American passive policy in the region (or even rebalancing efforts eastward). Iran and its regional adversaries are busy in improving their military capabilities these days. The mix of more weapons and fears is a bad omen for those who wish to prevent more violence in the region. The most prominent example is the aggressive Saudi policy in the past months against Iran. This is indeed a shift in the Saudi approach but against rather than toward Iran.

Do you think that Iran will continue its nuclear program despite the agreement?

The Iranian strategy is a very cautious one. It comprises of three stages: developing the technological knowledge, translate it to nuclear capability, and finally, enhance its nuclear related capacity. Iran will surely be busy in promoting its technological capabilities and will test the limits of the agreements and the willingness of world powers, particularly the US, to enforce it due to a calculated strategy or a genuinely different interpretation of the agreement. I think the chances that Iran will abandon the agreement and go for the bomb are low, unless there is an existential threat on the regime. Unless this happens, Iran can live as an advanced nuclear threshold state and wait until this agreement expires.

Do you think the U.S. and its allies should develop "snapback" options to restore sanctions in case of Iranian non-compliance with the nuclear deal? If so, how do you think it should be framed and what should it consist of?

I think one of the greatest dangers to implementation is that once the sanctions come off, it will be impossible to re-impose them. Therefore, the United States must build consensus with its like-minded European and Asian partners about what a violation would entail and how to re-impose sanctions, either through the U.N. Security Council or outside the Security Council, if necessary. The US and its allies should define violations and the types of penalties that can be imposed on Iran in the event of a violation. It is impossible to anticipate every violation or scenario, but a robust process can develop a range of possible violations along with the types of steps that Iran would need to take to redress the potential violations. This mechanism is vital to ensure that small Iranian violations are treated with

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small penalties that demonstrate the American resolve to enforce the agreement without jeopardizing it. It is equally necessary to guarantee a quick response in case of a blatant Iranian violation: opening a new nuclear site, enriching Low Enriched Uranium to higher levels, or working on military related activities.

The question is how to raise the cost for an Iranian disobedience. We have seen that economic pressure, incorporated with other means can influence the Iranian calculus. Hence I believe a credible mechanism involves the US and its European allies – the ones that truly have economic relations with Iran – can serve as an important deterrent tool. It would also signal to the international community the American resolve to enforce this agreement and to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Do you think that American policy should aim to respond to the conventional military threat from Iran by forming a multi-national joint task force with its Sunni partners targeted at countering Iran's destabilizing regional activities? What would such a response potentially look like?

The first Sunni concern is not the nuclear threat from Iran but the non-nuclear one: the enhancement of the Iranian hegemony in the region, and the possibility of Washington shifting alliances in the region and allying with Iran. If the US wish to address its Sunni allies' concerns it should increase coordination with Gulf Cooperation Council partners on countering Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East. One potential way to do so is forming a new Multi-National Joint Task Force with Arab partners. This task force should aim at countering asymmetric threats from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Sunni extremists that would include joint exercises, training, intelligence, and joint actions.

What are your thoughts about the U.S. reinvigorating its high-level dialogue with Israel aimed at solidifying a joint strategy to prevent a nuclear armed Iran, as well as an Iranian empowerment on Israeli borders?

We all have heard about the side agreement between Iran and the IAEA which is essential for the implementation of the nuclear deal. I believe now it is time to strive for another side agreement: between the US and Israel to ensure high coordination on the nuclear issue, close cooperation against Iran's non-nuclear threats against Israel, including the support in terror organizations: Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas. In addition, this agreement should preserve Israel's Qualitative Military Edge to protect its security in the long run in perhaps the most dangerous region in the world; and to assist the US and Israel to prepare for the difficult post agreement reality when most of the constraints over the Iranian nuclear program will be lifted.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Know yourself, know your friends and know your enemies – start by studying the limitations of your perspective, continue with studying the perspectives of your allies and foes, and conclude with trying to bridge between them. One of the most common human mistakes is assuming that the other side shares the same set of values, information and world view. To understand the complex dynamics of contemporary international relations one must understand the different perceptions held by the different actors and how to bridge between them.

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This interview was conducted by Satgin Hamrah. Satgin is an Editor-at-large with E-IR