



The Problem With Making A Nuclear Deal With Iran

October 16, 2013 **Ilan I. Berman** *Forbes.com*

Related Categories: Iran

Someone might want to tell President Obama that, when it comes to Iran, he should be careful what he wishes for.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has doggedly pursued “engagement” with the Iranian regime. The idea, formulated while the president was still a senator on the campaign trail, was to provide a more diplomatic counterpoint to the George W. Bush-era policy of economic and political pressure. “We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist,” the President famously explained in March of 2009.

The Iranian regime had other ideas, however. It repeatedly spurned overtures from Washington, and deftly used the diplomatic breathing room created by them—most conspicuously, a negotiating track that ran for most of 2012—to forge ahead with its nuclear development. Meanwhile, in media appearance after media appearance, Iranian officials intoned that their government would give up none of its nuclear rights. The message was crystal clear: as far as Iran was concerned, there really wasn’t anything to talk about.

Until now. Over the past year, the economic pressure levied against the Iranian regime by the U.S. and its allies over the past decade has begun to bite in earnest. Inflation within the Islamic Republic is soaring, unemployment remains high, and poverty is worsening. The Iranian national currency, the *rial*, cratered earlier this year and remains very weak, while commodity prices are on the rise, progressively outpacing the ability of ordinary Iranians to pay for them.

All this has left the Iranian regime battered, and eager for an easing of the economic pain. This is the motivation behind the charm offensive undertaken in recent weeks by Iran’s new, “moderate” president, Hassan Rouhani, as well as his calls for “constructive engagement” with the West.

That’s the backdrop of the current round of talks with Iran, which got underway in Geneva earlier this week. At least publicly, U.S. officials are counseling tempered enthusiasm, but the writing is already on the wall. Iranian officials say they met with a “positive atmosphere” from Western diplomats for their three-stage proposal to gradually come into compliance with international demands regarding their nuclear effort.

But even if a deal does materialize, the Administration is liable to soon find out that “getting to yes” with Iran was the easy part. Because, in exchange for its nuclear proposals, the Islamic Republic is seeking to extract a steep price. As the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* outlined last month, Iran is looking for “the United States and Europe [to] rescind their sanctions against the Islamic Republic, lift the ban on Iranian oil exports and allow the country’s central bank to do international business again.” (The Iranians, moreover, are likely to stick to these demands, despite compromise plans now being floated within the Beltway to leave sanctions intact while providing Tehran with other economic relief.)

That’s bound to be a tall order, given the fact that most in Congress remain deeply skeptical about Iranian intentions, and because new sanctions that further tighten the noose around Iran’s energy sector and other points of economic leverage are already in the works. But it’s also a policy headache for the White House, for a simple reason.

Ever since the modern Iran sanctions era started in 1996, U.S. economic pressure wasn’t specifically tailored to Tehran’s pursuit of WMD. Instead, for more than a decade-and-a-half, U.S. sanctions have focused on the totality of Iran’s rogue behavior, from nuclear development to human rights abuses to support for international terrorism. And even though Tehran might be beginning to play ball on the nuclear front, it certainly isn’t on the others.

Rather, as the State Department’s most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism* makes clear, Iran not only remains a major state sponsor of terrorism but has actually stepped up its “terror-related activity” in Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere in recent months. On human rights, too, Iran’s policies remain deeply troubling; the February 2013 report of the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Iran, for example, found continued systemic violations of freedom of expression and the widespread official use of torture as a political instrument. And little on this front appears to have changed since Rouhani’s inauguration back in August.

These issues, however, have taken a back-burner to Iran’s nuclear file of late, as the Obama administration has scrambled for some sort of compromise with Tehran—one that now seems within reach. As a result, the White House is in danger of effectively becoming a lobbyist for the Islamic Republic, one that will need to coax and cajole a reluctant Legislative Branch into turning a blind eye to Iran’s other deformities because of tactical successes on the nuclear front.

That's not just bad policy; it's also a ruinous legacy for an Administration that has become obsessed with leaving a lasting one on foreign affairs. President Obama has pinned a great deal of hope on avoiding a confrontation with Iran's ayatollahs over their nuclear ambitions. And because he has, his Administration now runs the risk of going down in the history books as the moment that America stopped caring about Iran's human rights atrocities and fomentation of radicalism abroad.

All of which can hardly be considered a victory—either for us or for the Iranian people.