



Red Line Redux

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The future path of U.S.-led nuclear negotiations with Iran, which have now reached a crucial stage, may be foreshadowed in the U.S. agreement with Syria to dismantle its chemical weapons program. Any U.S.-Iranian deal-making that follows the Syrian model, however, would prove nothing more than a pyrrhic victory, leaving the Middle East more dangerous and, ultimately, the United States less secure.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's recent visit to Jerusalem and Jiddah, reiterating President Obama's promise to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weaponry, shows that America's oldest and strongest allies in the region harbor strong concerns about where the nuclear talks are headed. Who can blame them? That Washington desperately wants a permanent deal with Tehran to avoid using force against its nuclear sites is laudable. That, as with Syria, it seems prepared to pursue problematic paths to get it is not.

Obama's reversal over punishing Syrian President Bashar Assad militarily for using chemical weapons, combined with U.S. talks with Tehran to date, make Washington's insistence that "all options" remain "on the table" for Iran's nukes ring hollow. In Damascus, Assad now knows that he can crack down on rebels and civilians in the most horrific fashion while remaining free of any legitimate danger from Washington. Not surprisingly, he's leaving no brutal stone unturned, even reportedly using a different kind of chemical weapon.

With Iran, the administration cut corners to achieve its interim nuclear deal, such as by allowing Tehran's continued uranium enrichment and agreeing to keep certain nuclear sites free of global inspections, while providing sanctions relief that has significantly changed the U.S.-Iran dynamic. In fact, the interim deal, sanctions relief and related developments have brightened perceptions of Iran globally, restored the value of its rial, and helped Iran rebuild its economy, according to a new report from Roubini Global Economics and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. This has had the effect of strengthening Tehran's hand in the nuclear talks by markedly reducing its urgency to reach a permanent deal.

Similarly, a task force co-chaired by Ambassadors Eric Edelman and Dennis Ross concluded that while the interim deal delayed Iran's nuclear break-out capacity by a month, that modest benefit was more than offset by provisions that allowed it to enrich uranium faster, reduced the pressure of sanctions and failed to address its nuclear weaponization activities.

Now, with the July 20 deadline for a permanent deal fast approaching, the administration seems reluctant to press Tehran on crucial matters related to Iran's nuclear pursuit, such as its ballistic missile program and any weaponization activities that it may have conducted at its Parchin military facility. That's troubling. Iran strengthened its ballistic missile program over the last year, according to a confidential United Nations report that Reuters revealed last week, while Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei recently ordered his military to produce such weapons en masse.

Those steps violate the spirit of the nuclear talks - since the missiles are designed to carry nuclear warheads - and also a 2010 U.N. Security Council resolution that directed Iran to stop all such activities. Meanwhile, Tehran continues to refuse International Atomic Energy Agency requests to inspect the Parchin site where, the Institute for Science and International Security reports, signs point to renewed activity.

Yes, administration officials acknowledge the important links among Iran's enrichment, its ballistic missile program and its alleged weaponization activities, and they vow to force all of them into the talks. But on the ballistic and weaponization issues U.S. officials seem more reactive to outside concerns than eager to raise these issues on their own.

In the interim deal, the administration sidestepped earlier U.S. demands that Iran stop all enrichment; separately, it downgraded its commitment to preventing an Iranian nuclear capacity to now merely constitute preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon. With that in mind, here's a reasonable scenario for the coming weeks:

With the deadline approaching and Washington desperate to show progress, the two sides could cut a final deal on approved enrichment levels along with a further easing of sanctions, leaving the two sides to promise to return to the ballistic and weaponization issues in the months to come. That would give Washington the fig leaf of victory, but leave Iran with better economic prospects and, thus, still more leverage in any remaining talks.

At that point, Washington would be unenthused about prosecuting Iranian violations on enrichment or refusals to negotiate further - akin to its posture as Assad has returned to chemical weapons usage. All of that would raise prospects for any of the following: an Israeli strike, a regional nuclear arms race, an emboldened Tehran and less U.S. influence and more danger to U.S. and allied interests in the region, and beyond.