



Courting a New Iran Deal — and Disaster

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When it comes to negotiations with Iran, hope truly seems to spring eternal in Washington, D.C.

For the past two years, the Biden administration has made diplomatic reengagement with the Islamic Republic the centerpiece of its Mideast policy, based on the notion that, with the proper inducements, Tehran can be coaxed back into the confines of the nuclear deal it hammered out with the West back in 2015. As part of that effort, Washington has offered a great many carrots to the Iranian regime, from relaxing its enforcement of existing sanctions to voicing only muted support for the brave opposition protesters now rallying against the ayatollahs in Tehran.

Those offers haven't had much impact, however. Iran's leadership has consistently rejected American overtures, even as it has inched toward the nuclear threshold. Last month, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, found evidence that the Iranian regime had enriched uranium up to 84 percent — far above the levels needed for civilian applications, and close to the 90 percent purity necessary to build an atomic weapon. U.S. government estimates now say Iran could make sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon in less than two weeks, if it made the strategic decision to do so.

Washington's response to these developments is, naturally, to seek more negotiations. There are now credible reports that the White House is quietly talking to Tehran about a qualitatively new nuclear deal. The terms appear to be simple: a "freeze for freeze" arrangement under which the Iranian regime will halt its nuclear development in exchange for a rollback of U.S. sanctions. But problems with the idea abound, because any such arrangement would lock in the worrying nuclear advances Iran has made to date while propping up the regime in Tehran economically.

This sad state of affairs is a testament to the bankruptcy of American policy. Simply put, the United States — at least under the Biden administration — truly doesn't have a "Plan B" beyond negotiations for dealing with Iran's nuclear effort. And because it doesn't, we are now more and more likely to face two possible outcomes.

The first outcome is an Iran-dominated Middle East. After more than two decades of dedicated work, Iran's atomic program is increasingly robust, distributed, and mature. It is also clearly intended, for all of Tehran's public denials, to give the regime an offensive weapon. Iran's nervous neighbors sense as much and, in the absence of a coherent American plan to derail Iran's nuclear ambitions, have begun to court the regime in Tehran as a hedging strategy. Iran's recent, Chinese-brokered diplomatic rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the simultaneous thawing of its political ties with the United Arab Emirates can be seen in this context. As Iran draws closer and closer to the nuclear threshold, its influence in the region will continue to rise as nearby states are forced to accommodate the Islamic Republic.

The second outcome is an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear program. Such a possibility has been on the table for years, but policy-makers in Jerusalem have tended to defer to Washington regarding how best to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat. In recent weeks, however, Iran's nuclear advances — and its strategic partnership with Russia, which could soon provide it with advanced military technology — have added new urgency to Israel's calculations. As a result, more and more Israeli policy-makers are becoming convinced that the Jewish state may need to go it alone to prevent Iranian nuclearization. Herzi Halevy, the new chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, said as much several days ago when he told Army Radio that, while "it would be good to have the United States on our side" if Israel does go ahead and strike Iran, "it is not an obligation."

Against this backdrop it is increasingly clear that the Biden administration, through its single-minded pursuit of nuclear diplomacy with Iran, is courting disaster — either in the form of a region dominated by a nuclear Iran, or of a region destabilized by an Israeli military strike meant to ward off precisely that outcome. Washington needs to change course, before it's too late.