

Congressional Testimony

Iran Nuclear Negotiations After The Second Extension *Where Are They Going?*

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, Members of the Committee:
Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing.

I must confess to having deep concerns about the state of the negotiations with Iran.

I worry that, starting with the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), the United States has already agreed to a series of concessions that will make the achievement of a good deal very difficult.

The decision 14 months ago to accede to Iran's core demand that it retain an ability to enrich uranium was indeed a fateful one.

It reversed longstanding U.S. policy opposing any Iranian enrichment and contravened six hard-won U.N. Security Council resolutions.

It represented a strategic concession by the United States on an issue of central importance to Iran.

Whatever the merits of the Joint Plan of Action, the fact is that Iran was required to make no reciprocal concession of even remotely similar strategic value to the United States.

On the contrary, every commitment made by Iran under the JPOA has been strictly tactical in nature and easily reversible.

The administration's concession on enrichment had the effect of transforming the fundamental objective of U.S. strategy toward Iran.

It represented the abandonment of the goal of eliminating Iran's capability to produce nuclear weapons.

Instead, the United States retreated to the much less ambitious goal of simply extending the time it would take Iran to break out to a nuclear bomb.

The concession on enrichment, unfortunately, set the template for a troubling dynamic that has come to characterize the talks.

On a number of key issues, virtually all the concessions have come from the P5+1.

All the significant movement has been away from America's red lines and towards Iran's red lines.

In the process, the heart of America's longtime position with respect to Iran's nuclear program -- that is, the dismantlement, destruction, and irreversible rollback of Iran's nuclear weapons-related infrastructure -- has largely been gutted.

As problematic as this is, perhaps even more troubling is a second concession of enormous strategic consequence that the U.S. made to secure the JPOA.

I'm referring to the so-called sunset clause that put an expiration date on any comprehensive deal that might be reached.

In short, whatever restrictions that a final deal imposes on Iran's nuclear program will themselves only be temporary.

After a period of years yet to be determined -- the U.S. is hoping for 15 -- Iran will not only be free of all sanctions, it will be treated on a par with every other non-nuclear weapon state that is a member in good standing of the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty).

That means that Iran can be like Holland, which spins hundreds of thousands of centrifuges to produce reactor fuel.

It can be like Japan that maintains enough stockpiled plutonium for thousands of nuclear warheads.

It can be like Brazil that plans to produce highly enriched uranium of up to 90 percent to power its nuclear submarines.

All of that will be perfectly permissible -- regardless of whether Iran in 15 years is led by the equivalent of Ahmadinejad 2.0; regardless of whether its highest political and military leaders continue to call for Israel's destruction; and regardless of whether Iran remains the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism.

Some may hope that in those intervening 15 years Iran will be transformed into a normal, non-revolutionary power that is prepared to forego its war with the Great Satan and its ambitions to dominate the Middle East.

Perhaps those hopes will be borne out. But who would be willing to bet U.S. national security on it? That's an enormous risk to run.

I recognize, of course, that despite the very generous concessions the P5+1 have put forward, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's intransigence continues.

We can speculate on why that's the case and what more might still be done to break the stalemate by convincing the Supreme Leader to make the concessions necessary for a deal -- including the possibility of legislating prospective sanctions.

But at the same time I would simply urge that Congress devote at least as much energy to examining the substance of any deal that might emerge, with the aim of identifying those outstanding issues where Congress might still help to stiffen the administration's position in ways that would mitigate the risks as much as possible.

Finding ways to increase pressure on Iran to make a deal is certainly critical. But simply pressuring Iran for the purpose of accepting what could amount to a bad deal would be a pyrrhic victory, indeed.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present my views. I look forward to your questions.