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“Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran (IV)”

Many critics more expert than myself have commented on the technical details of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that the Obama administration has concluded with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In truth, it does not take an expert to understand the shortcomings of this deal, if the objective of the deal is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Since this is an objective that the administration plainly shares, its satisfaction with an arrangement that achieves this objective only temporarily, for a short period of time, while otherwise legitimating Iran’s eventual ability to weaponize its nuclear knowledge and nuclear infrastructure, is difficult to understand. From the standpoint of arms control, this deal is a respite, not a release, from our well-founded anxiety about Iran’s military ambitions. A respite is only a pause, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is only a pause. It is not a reckoning with the prospect of an Iranian nuclear arsenal, it is a postponement of such a reckoning. If this deal is implemented, and if its verification procedures prove adequate to their extremely difficult task, we will sleep more soundly for a while – not because we will have conquered our nightmares, but because we will have deferred them. We used a lot of leverage for too little.

The dissatisfaction with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that I have just expressed concerns only the arms control aspects of the deal. But arms control never takes place in a political and strategic vacuum. It cannot be insulated from history, certainly not if it is to succeed. We recently learned this rather bitterly in Syria, where the confiscation of its dictator’s arsenal of chemical weapons turned out to have no impact whatever upon the conduct or the outcome of this catastrophic war and its endless atrocities. In the Syrian case, indeed, the narrow focus upon arms control was a way to evade the larger moral and strategic challenges of the horrors, which the administration, its lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, has adamantly refused to face. I fear that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is playing a similar role in the thinking of the administration. The threat that Iran poses to its region, and to American interests and American allies, is not only a nuclear one, though the urgency of the nuclear threat cannot be doubted. The entirety of our relationship with Iran, and of our understanding of Iran’s role in its region, cannot be reduced to the question of the Iranian nuclear capability.

At least our adventure in arms control in Syria did not alter our contempt for its regime, even if our contempt had no practical implications for our policy. In the case of Iran, however, the deal that we have just concluded, and the spirit in which we concluded it, strongly suggests that this exercise in arms control represents something more: a revision of our troubled relationship with Iran, an attempt to establish some sort of detente with the Islamic Republic, a lovely hope that it can be reintegrated into the community of nations. The president has both confirmed and denied such an interpretation of the accord, in keeping with his tactical needs of the moment; but it is hard not to intuit in this deal the hand that he extended to the Islamic Republic as long ago as his first inaugural address. For this reason, it is important that the deal be analyzed not only as arms control but also as foreign policy. I want to say a few words about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action as foreign policy. It disappoints me as foreign policy even more than it disappoints me as arms control.

It is not always the case that conflict is the result of a misunderstanding or a mistake. Sometimes conflict is a sign that differences have been properly understood. The troubled relationship of the United States with Iran *should* be troubled. Our previous hostility to the Islamic Republic was not based on a misreading of the Islamic Republic, in its conduct within its borders or beyond its borders. When one speaks about an unfree country, one may refer either to its government or to its people, but one may not refer to both, because they are not on the same side. An expression of friendship toward a dictatorship is an expression of enmity, or indifference, toward its people. The president, when he speaks about Iran, likes to believe that he is speaking about, and to, its people, but in practice it is the regime to whom his hand has been so patiently extended. The text of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action states that we will submit a resolution to the Security Council “expressing a desire to build a new relationship with Iran”. Not a new relationship with a new Iran, but a new relationship with *this* Iran – with a criminal, oppressive, theocratic, belligerent, anti-American, anti-Semitic, misogynistic, and homophobic regime that is also a spectacular sponsor of terrorism.

What democrat, what pluralist, what liberal, what conservative, what believer, what non-believer, would want *this* Iran for a friend? What constructive role can *this* Iran play in the community of nations? And what constructive role can it play toward its own people? When the sanctions are lifted and Iran is economically rewarded for its limited and passing concessions on its enrichment program, it will of course use some of the windfall to intensify its mischief abroad, about which more in a moment, and it will use the rest of its windfall, or so we are told, to strengthen its economy. But we have no reason to think that opening up an economy has the effect of opening up a political system. For decades now China has been showing the world the opposite -- that economic liberalization need not entail political liberalization. Who really believes that the tyrants in Tehran want a more open society, or that they regard prosperity as incompatible with repression? We hear a lot about a contest in Tehran between hardliners and moderates, as we have in previous periods of wishful thinking about Iran; but it is important to remember that political conflict in Iran takes place within an absolutist structure of power in which supreme authority rests with a single individual who rules by divine sanction. He, and the Revolutionary Guards who harshly police his closed polity, are not elected or accountable officials.

Consider also the Iranian regime’s foreign policy. During the period of our negotiations with Iran, Iran was intervening furiously to inflame the Shia in Iraq, to prop up Bashar al Assad in Syria, to support Hezbollah in Lebanon, to arm Hamas in Gaza. Its regional aggressions, which were directed at American interests and American allies, were uninhibited by a fear of offending the United States during a delicate negotiation about an issue of the highest importance. We, by contrast, inhibited ourselves in all these places. We stayed our hand for many reasons, but one of them was precisely a worry about damaging our nuclear diplomacy with Iran. The lessons of the 1970s and 1980s, when we had the wisdom and the courage to press the Soviet Union all at once about arms control and human rights and proxy wars, were lost on our president, who never feels that he has much to learn from the twentieth century. And there is also the question, or rather the cause, of Israel. The Islamic Republic’s ceaseless calls for the extermination of the Jewish state must not be treated as some sort of foible or eccentricity that makes us sigh or wink as we get on with the really important business. It should disgust us as a nation, and our disgust should take the form of policy. Whatever one thinks of Israel’s methods of intervening in the American debate, or of its actions and inactions toward the Palestinians, it would be indecent not to understand Israel’s anguish at the prospect of the nuclearization of a state that arms its enemies and is eager for its destruction.

From the standpoint of foreign policy, the nuclear accord disturbs me because it will almost certainly invigorate a contemptible and bellicose regime. And so I propose that, in the aftermath of the accord, we proceed to do what we can to weaken that regime. The adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action should be accompanied by a resumption of our hostility to the Iranian regime and its various forces. This suggestion is not as paradoxical as it seems. Diplomats like to say that you talk with your enemies. They are right. And we have talked with them. But they are still our enemies.

We need to restore democratization to its pride of place among the priorities of our foreign policy, and to oppress the theocrats in Tehran everywhere with expressions, in word and in deed, of our implacable opposition to their war on their own people. We need to support Iranian dissidents in any way we can, not least so that they do not feel abandoned and alone, and we must indefatigably demand the release of Mir-Hosseini Moussavi and Mehdi Kairoubi from the house arrest in which they have been sealed since the regime's crackdown on the democratic rebellion of 2009, on which our government turned its back. (And how in good conscience could we have proceeded with these negotiations while an innocent American journalist was held captive in an Iranian jail?) We need to despise the Iranian regime loudly and regularly, and damage its international position as fiercely and imaginatively as we can, for its desire to destroy Israel. We need to degrade, by sanctions and other means, the more dangerous elements of Iran's conventional arsenal. We need to arm the enemies of Iran in Syria and Iraq, and thereby offer a consequential impediment to Iran's plain-as-day campaign to attain regional hegemony.

But even as I say these words my heart sinks, because I know that this administration will not accept such activist prescriptions. Its belated and half-hearted and bumbling attempts to create what it calls a "New Syrian Force" have been risible, and also tragic. It will not even consider action against Iran's staunchest and most despicable client in the region, Bashar al-Assad and his slaughterhouse regime. But it is not just the Obama administration that has preferred a diminution of America's presence in the world. When it comes to asserting American power as a force for security and justice, of recognizing the legitimacy and the necessity of American interventions against evils that offend our interests and our values – and of recognizing, too, that there are many courses of action that fall between Obama's lassitude and Bush's shock and awe – when it comes to articulating a robust sense of America's responsibilities in the world, neither Democrats nor Republicans have covered themselves in glory in recent years. The adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action would be an appropriate occasion for opening a new discussion of the first principles of our foreign policy.