



THE REAL DEAL

By Adam Garfinkle



Adam Garfinkle is a Fox Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Editor of The American Interest magazine.

It seems there is a deal. We know that because the President has already begun his pirouettes as befitting his role as Spinner-in-Chief, and because we have a leaked Russian version of the text that seems pretty realistically what it claims to be. Let me admit right off that I doubted that the Ayatollah Khamenei could bring himself to take “yes” for an answer, for reasons I have laid out several times before (most recently, in short, in “[The Waiting Game](#)”, TAI Online, July 9). And I believe that there’s a good chance he has made a fateful error, from his point of view, in so doing (of which more below).

There will be torrents of commentary coming our way. Some people are actually capable of reading the text professionally, with the requisite political experience and technical background, to make sense of the deal. And some will comment despite not being able to do this. Arguments from authority are always to be suspected, but experience and competence are not to be dismissed either. So take care of whom you trust in this.

Many will not take care, however, because their minds are already made up about the deal, text or no text or whatever text. Some will be for it just because they think it obviates the road to war. Not surprisingly, that is what the NIAC statement emphasizes, and you can tell it is a text-analysis-free statement because it was written before any text was available to read. I saw it at about 4 AM. It is fair, I think, to surmise that the fact of an agreement pushes any prospect of a U.S.-Iranian conventional military conflict way out into the misty future. But it is also fair to argue that it makes a *nuclear* war in the region, perhaps involving the United States and perhaps not, *more* likely, after approximately 15 years. More about that below.

By the same token, some will oppose the deal, regardless of the text, because it represents the U.S. blessing of Iran as a threshold nuclear military power. That has ever been the Israeli position, very publicly—too publicly, actually, because the way the Israeli Prime Minister went about this leaves Israel with approximately zero influence on what happens next. We might as well note, too, that this Israeli government will probably again turn to its supporters in Congress in what is almost certain to be a futile attempt to derail the deal—which would require getting a veto-proof vote of rejection in both Houses—in a way that will only exacerbate the damage already done to the tradition of bipartisan U.S. support for Israel.

But it’s not only the Israeli government that takes this view. So does the Saudi government, but it has been wise enough to keep its mouth more or less shut in public so that it might retain some influence behind the wizard’s curtain. That might be futile, too; yet the Saudis might at least rate a *quid pro quo* in the longer run for their approach. We shall see.

But so do lots of serious American observers and analysts take this view, and the reason is clear: These negotiations started more than 20 months ago, during the Obama first term, with the aim of shutting off and shutting down any Iranian enrichment or reprocessing—the two technical routes to acquire fissile material for a nuclear weapon. The negotiations failed to achieve that as the Iranians worked hard to complete their mastery of the nuclear cycle. That is why many of the first-term officials involved in this effort left government disappointed in the President’s approach—Dennis Ross, Gary Samore, Robert Einhorn, for example—and signed onto the June 24 WINEP statement drawing, in effect, 11th-hour redlines on the kind of much-reduced deal still left to be gotten.

Now, some such people and those of similar view may be persuaded that the deal gets over the bar, and that it is preferable to the alternatives at least for duration of the Obama Administration term. For those people, the tightness and reliability of the verification provisions will be the key. The terms of the rest of the deal are better than many of us expected, at least given the reduced parameters of expectation that have existed since November 2013—but I will leave it to others to write tomes about those details. It is clear, just in summary, that both sides made concessions in the past few weeks, and it looks to me that the Iranian ones exceed both in number and significance those of the P5+1 (which the agreement refers to as the E3/EU+3).

But if one believes that no deal can be a good deal if it allows *any* Iranian enrichment, *any* Iranian centrifuge R&D, over the next 15 years, then the verification issues amount to a mere gratuitous mist of cordite on top of barrels of Sarin and VX. There has been and remains a good case for this view, what we might call, with apologies to John Rawls, the original position of no-enrichment. Every day that the U.S. government allows Iranian enrichment to go on is a day that counts as another bullet in the corpse of U.S. anti-proliferation policy. But this did not start with the Iranian portfolio. It started, going all the way back to 1994, with the North Korean portfolio. The 1994 Agreed Framework turned out to be a huge mistake. It was a reasonable risk to have taken at the time, given the circumstances of the early post-Soviet collapse era, but at least a few prominent officials in the Clinton Administration—Bill Perry and a younger but already wise Ash Carter—argued within chambers that a military strike was the only real way to avoid piles of proliferation rocks from rolling down the mountain. They did not win the day, alas, and here we are.

The problem with this view, however much I sympathize with it in the abstract, is that it argues more in and about that past, albeit it in an odd sort of way, than it is capable of doing anything in and about the present. What do I mean?

Well, another good case can be made that the time to have begun negotiations with Iran over the nuclear program was just after the statue of Saddam Hussein came down in Firdos Square. We had at that time a shotgun pointed at Iran's left temple from Afghanistan and another shotgun pointed (we thought, but not for long, as it turned out) at Iran's right temple from Iraq. One could faintly hear sounds of "uncle, uncle" coming from Teheran, and indeed some in the upper realms of the U.S. government wanted to engage Iran over Afghanistan—where our interests aligned more or less against the Taliban, and they were offering—and over the nuclear business as well. We had leverage, they acknowledged it, and then, more than a dozen years ago, Iran was still far from having mastered the fuel cycle. So it is not whimsical to wonder whether a deal begun under such circumstances could have ended, years ago already, with zero Iranian enrichment and zero Iranian centrifuge R&D.

I wondered enough to ask my old boss about this a month or two ago. I was not surprised by General Powell's one-word email reply (he is a terse guy at times): "unanswerable." Of course such a question vaults us into the airy world of the counterfactual. And maybe Iran's long-term determination to get to where it has gotten today means that we could not have grasped the no-enrichment brass ring back then, no matter what. I suspect that would have been the case. But Powell is right: It is unanswerable and, indeed, we'll never know. But some of the same folks now criticizing the deal for not doing what has become pretty much impossible over time are those who, in government at that time and out, were dead set against talking with the Iranians. Remember the line? "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat evil." So this is why when I hear certain people rail against this deal on "original position" grounds, it tends to turn my ears red.

This little exercise in history is not just decorative. It matters because it highlights the truth, which I have pounded on before [["The Arms Control Fallacy,"](#) May 4], that arms control diplomacy cannot achieve inside a negotiating room what the parties are not willing to contest outside the negotiating room.

Whatever the President has said about all options being on the table, and about the "fact" that Iran will not get a nuclear weapons under his watch—and he and other senior officials have said these things so many times to so many audiences over so many years that, if it's all just a lie, it's the biggest whopper in American history—if the Administration's behavior led the mullahs to discount any prospect of an American attack, arms control diplomacy never stood a chance of even budging strategic realities, for it had become thoroughly detached from those strategic realities. All it could ever do under such circumstances is affect matters of timing and tonality at the margins.

And, again as argued before, it is rare historically for arms control deals among adversaries to really limit anything. More often they have frozen or redirected activity into other military areas, so that their strategic utility has been modest or even negative. There is no magical arms control pixie dust that makes real problems and dangers vanish into the ether. Let's put it this way: You can't affect the position of a shadow by doing things to the shadow; arms control negotiations are the shadows, and strategic realities cast them.

In the case of these protracted negotiations, what that means is that short of a credible threat to use force, no agreement could erase the implications of the Iranian mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle. So it's sort of ironic. Back in the spring of 2003, the U.S. threat to use force against Iran was very credible but we refused to deploy diplomacy to try to take advantage; over the past 20 months, we have deployed diplomacy but have been unable to credibly threaten force. In some ways this sounds like a very badly repurposed version of O'Henry's "Gift of the Magi." Or, if you're statistically instead of literarily minded, like Type I and Type II errors passing in the night.

Those who would parse the deal under the presumption that no-enrichment was not possible given the circumstances, and who will therefore focus on the verification package and *inter alia* the role of the IAEA, will probably end up being the swingmen in the coming debate. The no-enrichment purists will not change their minds, and the anything-is-better-than-war crowd will not change theirs either. So what does that vortex of debate look like?

So far it does not look so good for the Administration. If the IAEA cannot achieve full-time high-tech monitoring, and if it is denied timely and unlimited inspection rights, then it vitiates all the recent concessions the Iranians have made about the number and nature of centrifuges, about what goes on in Fordow, Nantasz and Arak, and the rest. I do not have an authoritative text in hand yet, so I resist jumping to this conclusion. But from preliminary information, it looks like the old, highly unsatisfactory patterns of Iranian behavior with regard to the IAEA are more or less replicated.

If that is the case, then it will prove very hard, if not impossible, to get enough goods on Iranian violations to trigger the 65-day snapback sanctions provision, which means that for all practical purposes that provision is voided. Note, too, that a prematurely fatigued verification regime means that new Iranian covert efforts will be off the agreement map—and this matters because there has not been a moment in the past 20 years, at least, that Iran has not had or attempted to have covert nuclear programs. In other words, if a resource-challenged IAEA has to spend nearly all its energy gaming around with cheats over Arak and Fordow, it'll have meager resources left over to devote to uncovering entirely new modes of Iranian violations.

Will doubts over the verification provisions sink the deal in the Congress? Maybe, but I doubt it. The provisions of the Corker-Cardin bill are such that both Houses would have to override a presidential veto with two-thirds of their members. That one can imagine happening in the House, maybe; it's harder to imagine in the Senate. This is a strange hybrid arrangement in the first place, of course. Instead of the standard two-thirds for a "yes" to ratify a treaty, we have an inverted paradigm: We need two-thirds "no", in both Houses, for a "no" to void what amounts to an executive agreement. That said, it's probably the best that could have been arranged under the circumstances.

Does any of this really matter? Yes, it does to point. If Republicans and a few Democratic allies try hard to scuttle the deal and fail—and assuming nothing kinetic or otherwise strange happens in U.S.-Iranian relations in the meantime—it'll arguably strengthen the Administration politically, and also make life a lot easier for Hillary Clinton going forward. The incentive to try is heightened, of course, by the advent of GOP primary season, whose *de facto* anthem seems to be the Looney Tunes theme song. White House political operatives are probably licking their lips over the useful GOP antics to come. (I, for one, can barely wait to hear Donald Trump expostulate on the separation-work-unit capacity of various kinds of centrifuges and related esoterica.) Could the GOP leadership recognize the danger and turn down the amplifier? Not this GOP leadership.

The way things turn out will also affect U.S. relations with a range of allies, and not just Middle Eastern ones. The Japanese are watching this business very closely, as are Poles, Australians, and many selected others. But in a sense U.S. allies are already locked in a lose-lose proposition. If the deal goes through, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence has to shrink in a world of mousetrapping Middle Eastern proliferation; if it is somehow improbably stopped by congressional action, it harms the power of the presidency, which allies tend to like even less under most circumstances.

But the debate to come matters only to a point. Why? Because the strategic stake here is not just about whether or how Iran acquires a nuclear weapons arsenal. It is about what happens to the broader region and world as a result. To the Administration's credit, it has long recognized and spoken clearly about the real problem several times. To its considerable credit as well, it has dismissed the irresponsible and lazy assertion that the deterrence model of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War experience could be easily superimposed on the Middle East (a point I took pains to stress nearly a decade ago and ever since; "[Culture and Deterrence](#)," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, August 25, 2006). But the way it has gone about these negotiations—by delinking them from Iranian behavior; salivating to the point of embarrassment over the nirvanic transformation of U.S.-Iranian relations supposedly to come; and by going out of its way, it has sometimes seemed, to piss off close allies—has created such fear and insecurity that it is bringing about, through the advent of slightly orthogonal means, the very problem that the deal with Iran was supposed to obviate.

In my view, deal or no deal, it's too late now to stop the mousetraps from springing in a slow-motion arc over the next decade and a half. Iran is a nuclear threshold state come what may, and the U.S. unwillingness to roll that reality back, and even now to bless it, means that, certainly in 15 years if not before, several other states in the region will want to protect themselves against the consequences. That likely includes Turkey by and by as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and possibly others.

U.S. efforts to dissuade these actors from proliferating will face grave obstacles. Great powers are in the protection business, and when a great power's pledges of protection are not credible for one reason or another, clients will look to other protectors if they can be found, or to various forms of self-help, or to protective, anticipatory abasement before threats, otherwise known as appeasement. Some may try all three, which can be a highly accident-prone kind of activity—as with, for example, Saudi Arabia importing Pakistani nukes into the heart of the Arab world. And of course the problem of fissile material, or actual weapons, getting into the hands of terrorist groups from failed or failing states just gets worse as a multiple of how many nuclear-weapons programs and states there are.

U.S. credibility in this regard is hampered by so many factors that it is, at present anyway, generously overdetermined. The President says he favors nuclear zero; the consequences for the credibility of extended deterrence are obvious and starkly negative. This Administration has failed to adequately modernize the triad, so our capabilities are coming into question. We have too small defense budgets tied down additionally by sequestration, and the optic there reinforces the general picture of declining will as well as power. We also have, it at least seems to many, a foreign policy theory of the case in the White House where allies are thought to be Cold War atavisms that are not U.S. strategic assets but impediments to a safer and less costly retrenched U.S. foreign policy.

And of course, quite aside from the debased qualities of the American protector, we have a highly unsettled regional situation in which politics have been militarized and ideologies polarized. It is a situation that will not surcease anytime soon. So the Iran deal will pour itself into these contours, and its impact will to some extent depend on those contours. But it is not the shaping factor, and in itself it will not—because it cannot—really change those contours.

Note, too, that the debate about whether the deal depends for its meaning or merit on whether the Iranian regime changes over the course of the next 15 years is both less and more than meets the eye. If there is to be an Iranian nuclear arsenal, it would be better if a less noxious regime had control of it. But that does not speak to the mousetrap problem, and it doesn't guarantee that a "better" Iranian regime—by which we mean one that thinks more like us—would rid itself of that arsenal or even be a better steward of it. The Iranian program is in any event not by origin an Islamic program; it goes back to the Shah, and any strategic analyst who sits in Teheran looking out the window and swivels in his office chair 360 degrees can see why.

So yes, Iran might change as a result of this agreement and that could be a good thing. But there is no reason it has to change or change for the better in a way that matters much to this problem. In a sense this entire line of argument, or reasoning, is a red herring. It wasn't that way a decade ago, before the run on nuclear mousetraps around the region. But it is now.

That said—and here is where the change postulate might be more than meets the eye—if sanctions relief is to come, it is probably in the U.S. interest to rush as much of the roughly \$150 billion involved into the Iranian economy as fast as possible. It is likewise in our interest to open the economy to all manner of foreigners as quickly as possible: sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll to the max. If we want to weaken the regime—and its emetic IRGC/Qods Brigade Praetorian guard—we should do our best to serve up maximum feasible Schumpeterian "creative destruction," the same stuff that KO'ed the Shah. The more social change we help unleash, and generate from a new baseline, the more the inability of the current Iranian regime to adjust will doom it to oblivion.

The regime fears its own people and is doubtless prepared now to crack down hard, lest melting glaciers of pent-up frustration get out of hand. How this will play out is hard to say; it may hurt Rouhani more than help him. In any event, we need to do what we can to undermine or overwhelm the crackdown, and being a little (or a lot) more voluble on Iranian human rights violations—which are massive and ongoing—is not a bad way to go about that given the limited means at our disposal to influence internal Iranian social trends.

Looking ahead, what should the U.S. government be doing? Let me skip all the obvious near-term options that dozens of analysts will discuss and focus instead on just one relatively big idea—a stretch goal, so to speak (the dirty work that *someone* has to do).

If 15 years from now we have an N+3 or N+4 or N+5 proliferation situation in the Middle East and environs, the prospect of preventing the use of nuclear weapons in anger over the long haul decreases as a geometric function of how many such states there are. As Henry Kissinger said long ago, before it was popular to talk about such things, it was hard enough during the Cold War to ensure deterrence between just two powers whose elites spoke more or less the same Western cultural language. The idea that a self-regulating nuclearized regional subsystem in the Middle East could reliably prevent nuclear exchanges more or less indefinitely into the future is therefore a kind of madness. We have to assume, if we err on the prophylactic side of safety, that there is going to be a nuclear exchange in the region—perhaps spilling over into South Asia and even elsewhere—unless something fairly novel is done to prevent it.

Now, some may argue that preventing a nuclear exchange in the Middle East that does not involve the United States as a combatant or as a collateral victim is not a vital U.S. interest. I am not among them. The United States has an overwhelming vital interest as the first-resort provider of global order in preventing millions of innocent people from being killed in a nuclear exchange. We arguably have a special interest in preventing a nuclear exchange that might involve Israel. So let us put the question starkly and directly: Can the U.S. government sterilize the capacity of regional states from engaging in a nuclear exchange?

Obviously, such an effort would have to have a diplomatic dimension. Over time we would be wise, to take just one example, to try to drag no-first-use pledges out of all relevant parties. But I am thinking about an actual technical capacity to interdict, suppress, or sterilize an exchange.

Now consider: These young Middle Eastern arsenals would likely be fairly modest in size, not especially sophisticated for a good long while, and probably capable of being delivered only by tractable aircraft and missiles. Could we through a combination of conventional precision-strike munitions and cyber-ops—accompanied of course by space- and land-based intelligence assets for purposes of target acquisition—abort the attempt of 3rd and 4th parties, so to speak, from launching nuclear weapons against each other and/or their other neighbors? Might rapidly deployable forms of missile defense augment such a capability?

We cannot reliably do any such thing right now, but there is no scenario for which such a capability is fully relevant right now. Looking to the future, yes we can do this, if we try. We should therefore begin now quietly developing the means to unilaterally sterilize, or suppress to the extent possible, the prospects for nuclear weapons exchanges within the Middle East, and do some serious thinking about how to integrate such a capability into U.S. military doctrine.

Of course there will ultimately be the usual orgy of hypocrisy about America as an unbidden and unwelcome world policeman when word gets out about what we're up to—as it surely will. There will also be the usual bleating about preemption, even though in this case we would be preempting a situation in which the United States is not a principal. I don't care; the stakes are so high that they render such nuisances truly negligible.

The Iran deal certainly is powerless to prevent the kind of future that calls for this capability. If anything, it accelerates that future coming into being by some non-trivial but incalculable degree. We will be consumed by technical assessments of verification provisions for weeks to come, and the airwaves and media outlets will be brimming with the political implications and other short-term Warholish obsessions. Wise people would do well to start looking beyond the froth to what really matters. What really matters looking out ahead is very scary, but it is not something we are powerless to affect. And we really need to affect it.