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# Deal or No Deal? Actually, That's Not the Right Question.

There are plenty of good reasons why the Iran deal matters -- but the bomb isn't one of them.

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BY **STEPHEN M. WALT**

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The recent framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program has triggered an explosion of analysis, commentary, spin, criticism, hyperbole, and advocacy about the details of the emerging deal. I don't know about you, but my inbox and Twitter feed have been inundated with a seemingly endless parade of discussions about centrifuges, levels of enrichment, additional protocols, permissible R&D (both past and future), and a host of other arcana, as if the only thing that mattered was the terms of the deal itself. Expect to see more of the same between now and June, as the negotiators work to flesh out the framework, bridge the remaining gaps, and eliminate any significant ambiguities.

But guess what? In the end, the terms of the deal itself aren't all that important. As former State Department official Jeremy Shapiro (now at the Brookings Institution) writes in an insightful commentary, the details of the nuclear deal aren't all that important. Rather, what matters is what the deal portends for Iran's future relations with the rest of the world. **In his words:**

*[T]he details [of the deal] don't matter because the Iranian nuclear program is not really what opponents and proponents of the recent deal are arguing about. Sure, the nuclear program focuses the mind and it engages the public with a clarity that only nuclear weapons possess. But it is more a symbol of the fight over Iran policy than the core of the issue. At heart, this is a fight over what to do about Iran's challenge to U.S. leadership in the Middle East and the threat that Iranian geopolitical ambitions pose to U.S. allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia.*

Shapiro is right. For starters, the terms of the deal may not matter because Iran may never decide to try to weaponize and cross the nuclear threshold, *no matter what the negotiators eventually agree upon*. Iran has had some sort of nuclear research program since the 1970s — that's 40-plus years, folks — and it still hasn't made a serious sprint for an actual bomb. Israel did, Pakistan and India did, South Africa did (and then gave up its arsenal), and so did North Korea. Iran could almost certainly have weaponized by now if it really, really wanted to. But it hasn't.

Iran may have refrained in part because Supreme Leaders Khomeini and Khamenei have declared nuclear weapons to be **contrary to Islam**. But it has significant strategic reasons not to go forward as well. If Iran were to build a weapon, there is some chance that other states in its neighborhood would follow suit. As discussed below, Iran has more latent power potential than any other state in its region, and it might prefer a regional environment in which nuclear weapons did not constrain its ability to throw its weight around. As long as Tehran doesn't have to worry about U.S.-backed regime change, its strategic position might be better off without the bomb. If top leaders in Iran see things this way, then they won't weaponize no matter what the final agreement does or does not permit them to do.

Furthermore, from Iran's perspective, *not* possessing nuclear weapons removes any danger that it would get blamed for giving a bomb to another states or to terrorist groups. Right now, if some terrorist group stole a bomb and used it, no one would blame Iran because we know Iran does not have an actual nuclear device. But if Iran were to weaponize, it would have to worry about being blamed should terrorists get a bomb, even if it had nothing whatsoever to do with it. That fear might sound far-fetched, but remember that the Bush administration responded to 9/11 by invading *Iraq*, even though Saddam Hussein wasn't involved and was in fact deeply hostile to al Qaeda. In the frantic aftermath of an actual nuclear detonation, Tehran could not be confident that other states would exercise careful judgment in responding. Given that concern, it might be better to stay on this side of the nuclear weapons threshold, no matter what the precise terms of a final agreement turn out to be.

Another reason the details don't matter is that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would not be that significant an event. I know this idea is hard to accept given all the hype that has surrounded its nuclear program, but that is the lesson history teaches. Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb didn't cause the Cold War (it was well underway already), and it didn't enable the USSR to intimidate NATO, dominate Eurasia, or "bury capitalism." Indeed, all those powerful nuclear weapons and ICBMs didn't stop the USSR from collapsing. China's nuclear test in 1964 didn't suddenly turn it into a great power (it took Deng Xiaoping's reforms and 30 years of rapid economic growth to do that). None of the other nuclear weapons states saw their international status change demonstrably after they demonstrated the narrow technical capacity to explode a fission weapon (which is at this point just mid-20th century technology). The same is likely to be true for Iran: Testing a bomb would generate lots of headlines and articles and provoke other states to shore up defenses and deterrent commitments — for a while. But after a few months, the world would get distracted by something else and we'd realize that an Iranian bomb was not a game-changer after all.

To be sure, having a few survivable weapons could help Tehran deter outside powers from attacking it directly or attempting forceful regime change. But that's about all it would do. Having tens of thousands of nuclear weapons didn't permit the mighty Soviet Union to blackmail its neighbors and having a handful of atomic bombs wouldn't give Tehran a lot of usable leverage either. (You may have noticed that America's vast nuclear arsenal didn't enable George W. Bush or Barack Obama to order other countries around, which merely underscores the limited political utility of these weapons.) An Iranian bomb might cause a few other states to think about getting nuclear weapons of their own (though even that reaction is hardly certain), but it wouldn't suddenly transform Iran into a global power or create a reliable shield under which it could conduct large-scale conventional aggression. Nor could Iran use its weapons against the United States, Israel, or any of its other neighbors, because Iran's leaders would almost certainly face a far more devastating retaliatory strikes. And whatever Iran's leaders might be, they are not suicidal.

So if the terms of the nuclear deal are not that important, what's all the fuss about? As Shapiro suggests, the real issue is what this deal portends about Iran's future relations with the outside world. That's what really worries countries like Saudi Arabia or Israel, and maybe a few other states too.

To be specific, the question is whether the nuclear deal will gradually let Iran out of the “penalty box” that it has been in since the Iranian Revolution, and especially since the imposition of tougher U.N. sanctions. Getting out of the penalty box would allow the Iranian economy to recover, pave the way for the restoration of diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran, and gradually allow the two states to deal with each other on a more normal and businesslike basis.

Why is this question so important, and why does it make current U.S. allies nervous? The root of this problem is Iran’s long-term power potential. Iran’s population is roughly 78 million people, compared with 38 million in Saudi Arabia, 33 million in Iraq, or a little more than 7 million in Israel. Its GNP is roughly \$500 billion, which is less than Saudi Arabia’s (\$750 billion) but larger than either Iraq’s (\$195 billion) or Israel’s (\$292 billion). And Iran’s economic potential has been stifled by past mismanagement and corruption, but also by increasingly strict economic sanctions.

Were Iran to leave the penalty box, rejoin the international community, open itself to trade and investment, and encourage its scientists, students, and business community to re-engage with the outside world, it would in all likelihood become the most powerful single state in the greater Middle East. That is the prospect that worries countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel, not the possibility that Iran might one day have a few nuclear weapons. But notice how this scenario also assumes that Iran becomes wealthier, better educated, more interdependent, and stronger, while retaining the very same foreign-policy principles that have been in place since 1979. This could happen, but it’s hardly likely.

Should the prospect of a stronger and more engaged Iran worry Washington too? Some, but not that much. Remember that America’s core strategic goal in the Middle East is preserving a rough balance of power, so that no single hostile power controls all the energy resources there. This interest is diminishing as the United States become more energy independent, but Middle East oil and gas still matters to the larger world economy and U.S. interests will still be somewhat engaged. This strategic interest does not require the United States to control or dominate the region (which we’ve proven we cannot do at acceptable cost); it just requires us to work with others to ensure that nobody else dominates it either. Fortunately, this latter task is relatively easy; indeed, the Middle East has never been more divided than it is right now.

A stronger Iran could in theory jeopardize the broader regional balance, though it has a long way to go before it could do that in any serious way. And if it were to try, the United States would find lots of willing allies eager for U.S. help to contain that problem.

In short, the United States can deal with a more powerful Iran by employing the same balance-of-power approach that it used in the Middle East from 1945 to 1990. The United States had important interests there, but it didn't keep large military forces in the region on a permanent basis and didn't fight any wars there. And when it created the Rapid Deployment Force after the fall of the Shah, it kept those forces over the horizon and out of the region, and intervened only when the balance of power broke down (as it did when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990). For most of this period, the United States relied on various local allies and shifted its position as threats evolved. It didn't work perfectly, but it worked much better than Clinton's policy of "dual containment" or George W. Bush's ill-fated effort at "regional transformation."

Preserving the regional balance would be easier today than it was back then, because the United States does not have to worry about a rival superpower like the Soviet Union and we are not as dependent on Middle East oil and gas. And bear in mind that even a vastly stronger Iran would have trouble projecting power throughout the predominantly Sunni Arab world. If the mighty United States could not control Iraq's internal politics after toppling Saddam Hussein, it is hard to see how Iran could dominate a vast geographic area that is mostly Arab (not Persian) and mostly Sunni (not Shiite). It could in theory cause some trouble by supporting various proxies, but such clients are often unreliable tools and "causing trouble" is not the same as exercising political control.

Furthermore, letting Iran out of the penalty box and building a businesslike relationship with Tehran would give the United States more influence over Iran's decision making than it has at present (admittedly, it would be hard to have less). Equally important, America's other Middle East allies in the region would be less likely to take U.S. backing for granted and would have to think harder about keeping Washington happy, if they understood that Washington was also talking to Tehran on a regular basis. Because the United States is thousands of miles away, it has the luxury of letting regional powers compete to win our favor and support. Opening the door to a more constructive relationship with Iran might irritate states that have become accustomed to monopolizing America's Middle East agenda, but that is precisely why smart U.S. strategists should welcome it. Having lots of options increases U.S. leverage, and leverage is exactly what we want.

Make no mistake, the scenario I am sketching here is not a panacea. We have some compatible interests with Iran (such as pacifying Afghanistan and defeating the Islamic State), but also some significant disagreements. There is also a long legacy of historical suspicion and resentment that will take time to overcome. Playing balance-of-power politics effectively also requires a degree of understanding and diplomatic finesse that has usually been lacking in U.S. diplomacy, and especially in this part of the world.

But let's not forget something else: For all our disagreements, Iran has a more open and participatory political system than most of our other friends in the Middle East. It does some pretty objectionable things (like backing Assad), but so do U.S. allies like Egypt, Israel, or Saudi Arabia. (And if we're honest with ourselves, we've done some pretty objectionable things ourselves). More than **50 percent of Iran's population** was born after the 1980 revolution, and many younger Iranians are eager to engage with the West. Americans should have enough confidence in our own ideals and values to believe that an opening to Iran will gradually pull them toward us, and not the other way around.

One more thing: It's not like the United States can keep Iran in the penalty box forever. It took a lot of diplomacy to pull the P5+1 together behind the current sanctions regime, and that coalition isn't going to hold if the United States ends up torpedoing the nuclear deal. Just as the United States eventually had to recognize the Soviet Union and Maoist China as legitimate powers — however much we disliked their ideology and opposed long-term aims — it will eventually have to acknowledge Iran as an important player in the region and engage it diplomatically. As Shapiro emphasizes, managing Iran's future role is the real challenge, and the proposed agreement to cap and constrain its nuclear program is just one part of that effort. And probably not the most important element.

Photo Credit: BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/Getty Images

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## America Has Abdicated Its Guiding Role in the Middle East to a Sectarian Arab Military Force

What could go wrong?

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BY JAMES TRAUB

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In the speech on counterterrorism policy that he delivered last year at West Point, President Barack Obama **made clear** that the United States would no longer try to fight the terrorist threat abroad on its own, but rather would aim to “more effectively partner with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold.” Last month, the Arab League answered that call by **pledging** to establish a joint Arab **military force** to respond to the growing chaos in the region. The Obama administration has given its cautious support to the proposal. A senior State Department official I spoke to said, “We welcome something like this, especially in Syria, but also elsewhere.”

I would say: Be careful what you welcome.

The actual details of this proposed army, including its members, force structure, and location, are to be worked out over the next several months. And as Arab unity — political or military — has often proved to be a mirage, there is good reason to be skeptical that the force will ever come into being. Even if it did, fundamental divisions among Arab states would ensure that a joint force would look more like a shifting coalition of the willing than a collective body like NATO, or even like the African Union's Peace and Security Council.

Nevertheless, a sense of real danger, combined with a fear of abandonment by the United States, has propelled the idea onto the Arab agenda. Egypt, which has pushed hardest for the joint force, worries that extremist violence in Libya will spill across the border between the two countries. After Islamic State fighters in Libya beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called for a U.N.-backed intervention force, or, failing that, the lifting of the arms embargo on the internationally recognized Libyan government in Tobruk. When the United States and Britain opposed both measures, Sisi apparently concluded that he would have to rely on his fellow Arabs, and began **sounding the tocsin** for a joint force.

The impetus for the force was Egyptian, but it will go nowhere without Saudi Arabia, the paramount political and financial force in the Gulf. The Saudis also see a grave threat on their doorstep, as Yemen has been overrun by Houthi tribesmen allied with Iran. Saudi Arabia has pulled eight other Arab nations, as well as the United States, into its air war against the Houthis. That war has thus become a prototype of a new form of collective regional action with the United States as a supporting player — precisely what Obama suggested at West Point.

The administration defends the Saudis' resort to force to stem the tide of the takeover of Yemen: The Houthis had placed Scud missiles on the border, while Iran had begun regular flights to Saada, the Houthi stronghold. But the State Department official I spoke to added that the hostilities would have to end soon in order to limit death and destruction, and to bring the Houthis to a political settlement.



There is, unfortunately, no sign that Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz agrees with that proposition. His apparent plan is to bomb the Houthis into submission. What's more, the Saudis are new to the game of military intervention, and they seem bent on reproducing America's worst mistakes. The air war has caused over 500 civilian deaths and an incipient humanitarian disaster; **created new opportunities** for al Qaeda, which has **seized** Mukalla, Yemen's fifth-largest city; and done nothing to hinder the Houthis' bid to conquer the strategic southern city of Aden. It's not a very encouraging prototype.

The fight is only two weeks old and perhaps the tide will turn. The more lasting problem is King Salman's idea of a political solution. Once he's evicted the Houthis, he plans to restore to power President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was forced to flee Yemen to Saudi Arabia. But it was the Saudis who put Hadi there in the first place; so weak is his writ that his army effectively abandoned him in favor of his widely hated predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hadi might survive, but only as a Saudi puppet. What's more, the Houthis are not Iran's puppets, as the Saudis insist, but a powerful indigenous force whose demands must be accommodated in a power-sharing agreement.

A comparable situation can be seen in Libya, where Egypt has given political and military support to the Tobruk government in its effort to destroy the rival government based in Tripoli. The former is avowedly "moderate," the other "Islamist," but these oversimplified terms disguise the reality of different regions, tribes, and ethnic groups vying for control. Again, the only lasting solution would be a political one. Yet right now the **greatest obstacle** to a cease-fire is the refusal of the Tobruk government to negotiate with the Islamists. The Tobruk prime minister, Abdullah al-Thinni, has **demande**d that the Arabs do in Libya what they're now doing in Yemen. That would be a catastrophe.

The United States has learned the hard way that it cannot simply prop up governments seen as illegitimate by their own people; that's why Obama has tried to condition military assistance to Iraq on political reform that offers a significant role to Sunnis. Arab autocrats do not accept this principle. Saudi Arabia reacted to political dissent among the Shiite majority in Bahrain by sending in a military force to help the Sunni monarchy in Manama crush the peaceful movement. The Sisi regime treats domestic dissent as a threat to national security; from Cairo's point of view, members of the Muslim Brotherhood are "terrorists" — a fifth-column version of the Islamic State.

The problem goes deeper still. The West defines African security problems more or less the same way African states do: Failing states, military coups, and aggressive warlords pose a danger beyond their own borders that must be addressed by external actors. That's why working with the African Union is relatively unproblematic. No such consensus exists with the Arab world. The Saudis see localized uprisings as manifestations of a relentless Iranian campaign to dominate the Middle East. The central battle is thus not moderate Islam versus violent extremism, as it is for the United States and the West, but Sunni versus Shiite. The joint strike force will be a Sunni, rather than an Arab, instrument; Iraq and Lebanon, where Shiites hold effective control, have shown no enthusiasm for the proposed body. This will have the effect of deepening existing schisms.

The other great regional bugbear is political Islam. The Emiratis and other Gulf states share Egypt's paranoia on the subject, and have also branded the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. None of them have shown any interest in bolstering Tunisia, a country beset by domestic terrorism. That's because the Tunisian government includes the Islamist Ennahda party. The United States has an interest in supporting nascent democracies and ending conflict through reconciliation. The Arab army won't do either.

But the United States also has a very serious interest in rolling back the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and suppressing al Qaeda and curbing the Houthis in Yemen. Here U.S. and Arab interests converge. The West cannot solve the problem of Islamic extremism; only the Islamic world itself can do that. Obama has said that the United States will henceforward work through partners when it comes to counterterrorism. As one Arab diplomat said to me about the proposed force, "If Obama's policy is to get the region to take care of its own problems, I think this is a good place to be." Indeed, from the Arab point of view, it is precisely the American abdication that has necessitated the new Arab activism. "The U.S. is not the 911 for these problems anymore," the diplomat put it.

When you're the hegemon, you can tell your partners how to behave; when you're not, you can't. The United States can no longer afford to play that role, and in any case doesn't want to. It must rely on, rather than simply conscript, its partners. And that means it must adapt, more than it has in the past, to its partners' views. Washington is thus in no position either to oppose the Arab joint strike force or to tell it how and where to act. It really is a lamentable state of affairs. But it's where we are.

FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP/Getty Images