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[Article 1.](#)
NYT

Another Syria Peace Conference

Editorial

JAN. 21, 2014 -- Few peace conferences have been set up amid the unrelenting pessimism that surrounds the talks involving Syria that open Wednesday in Switzerland. But while a peace agreement is unlikely to be

reached anytime soon, the meeting can still produce useful results. That has to be the approach of the conveners, including the United States, Russia and the United Nations. Crucial early goals should include a cease-fire and the delivery of humanitarian assistance to millions of desperate civilians. There were some shaky moments before the conference, which has taken months to arrange, even got started, not least when the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, issued a last-minute invitation for Iran to attend, then rescinded it after strong objections from America; from Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival; and from the Syrian opposition. The United States has said that Iran could not participate without publicly accepting a 2012 communiqué that is the basis of the conference and stipulates that the goal is a transitional administration by "mutual consent" of the Assad government and the opposition.

In the view of the United States, this means that President Bashar al-Assad would be replaced, although Assad government officials and his Alawite sect could be part of the new structure. Iran has refused to accept any preconditions.

Just how the invitation from the United Nations was fumbled is unclear, but it is unfortunate that some diplomatic solution could not have been found to include Iran, which along with Russia is Syria's main ally, providing President Assad with arms and other military support. In an interview with The New York Times and Time magazine last month, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said Iran would not be an impediment to a political settlement. "We have every interest in helping the process in a peaceful direction," he said. "We are satisfied, totally satisfied, convinced that there is no military solution in Syria and that there is a need to find a political solution in Syria."

The deaths of thousands of civilians have not persuaded Russia and Iran to break with Mr. Assad or at least pressure him to end the slaughter and cruelty against civilians. Iran might have ensured itself a seat at the peace conference if it had promised to suspend arms deliveries while negotiations were underway or persuaded Mr. Assad to call a cease-fire. And there are good reasons for Russia and Iran to play a constructive role. The civil war has drawn affiliates of Al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists to the Syrian battlefield, and these could eventually be a threat to Shiite-led Iran as well

as Russia, which is fighting extremists in the Caucasus and worrying about attacks during the Winter Olympics in Sochi next month.

Mr. Zarif acknowledged this problem generally, asserting that “the continuation of this tragedy in Syria can only provide the best breeding ground for extremists who use this basically as a justification, as a recruiting climate, in order to wage the same type of activity in other parts of this region.”

The peace conference is already providing a service by refocusing attention on the savagery of the war, now in its third year. On Monday, a team of legal and forensic experts commissioned by the government of Qatar, a main sponsor of the Syrian opposition, said that thousands of photographs — apparently smuggled out of Syria by a defecting military police photographer — showed scarred, emaciated corpses that offered “direct evidence” of mass torture by Syrian government forces.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also accused opposition forces, as well as the government, of human rights abuses. In all, more than 100,000 Syrians are believed to have been killed in the war, many by government forces that have bombed cities and deprived civilians of food and other essential needs. It is well past time to say “enough” to more civilian deaths — and exactly the right time for a cease-fire and secure deliveries of humanitarian supplies.

[Article 2](#)
NYT

WikiLeaks, Drought and Syria

Thomas L. Friedman

JAN. 21, 2014 -- In the 1970s, I got both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in modern Middle East studies, and I can assure you that at no time did environmental or climate issues appear anywhere in the syllabi of my courses. Today, you can’t understand the Arab awakenings — or their solutions — without considering climate, environment and population stresses.

I’ve been reporting on the connection between the Syrian drought and the uprising there for a Showtime documentary that will air in April, but

recently our researchers came across a WikiLeaks cable that brilliantly foreshadowed how environmental stresses would fuel the uprising. Sent on Nov. 8, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus to the State Department, the cable details how, in light of what was a devastating Syrian drought — it lasted from 2006-10 — Syria’s U.N. food and agriculture representative, Abdullah bin Yehia, was seeking drought assistance from the U.N. and wanted the U.S. to contribute. Here are some key lines:

■ “The U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs launched an appeal on September 29 requesting roughly \$20.23 million to assist an estimated one million people impacted by what the U.N. describes as the country’s worst drought in four decades.”

■ “Yehia proposes to use money from the appeal to provide seed and technical assistance to 15,000 small-holding farmers in northeast Syria in an effort to preserve the social and economic fabric of this rural, agricultural community. If UNFAO efforts fail, Yehia predicts mass migration from the northeast, which could act as a multiplier on social and economic pressures already at play and undermine stability.”

■ “Yehia does not believe that the [government of Bashar al-Assad] will allow any Syrian citizen to starve. ... However, Yehia told us that the Syrian minister of agriculture ... stated publicly that economic and social fallout from the drought was ‘beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.’ What the U.N. is trying to combat through this appeal, Yehia says, is the potential for ‘social destruction’ that would accompany erosion of the agricultural industry in rural Syria. This social destruction would lead to political instability.”

■ “Without direct assistance, Yehia predicts that most of these 15,000 small-holding farmers would be forced to depart Al Hasakah Province to seek work in larger cities in western Syria. Approximately 100,000 dependents — women, children and the elderly or infirm — would be left behind to live in poverty, he said. Children would be likely to be pulled from school, he warned, in order to seek a source of income for families left behind. In addition, the migration of 15,000 unskilled laborers would add to the social and economic pressures presently at play in major Syrian cities. A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may

not be able to absorb another influx of displaced persons, Yehia explained, particularly at this time of rising costs, growing dissatisfaction of the middle class, and a perceived weakening of the social fabric and security structures that Syrians have come to expect and — in some cases — rely on.”

Yehia was prophetic. By 2010, roughly one million Syrian farmers, herders and their families were forced off the land into already overpopulated and underserved cities. These climate refugees were crowded together with one million Iraqi war refugees. The Assad regime failed to effectively help any of them, so when the Arab awakenings erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrian democrats followed suit and quickly found many willing recruits from all those dislocated by the drought.

But also consider this: Last May 9, The Times of Israel quoted Israeli geographer Arnon Soffer as observing that in the past 60 years, the population in the Middle East has twice doubled. “There is no example of this anywhere else on earth.”

And this: Last March, the International Journal of Climatology published a study, “Changes in extreme temperature and precipitation in the Arab region,” that found “consistent warming trends since the middle of the 20th century across the region,” manifested in “increasing frequencies of warm nights, fewer cool days and cool nights.”

And then consider this: Syria’s government couldn’t respond to a prolonged drought when there was a Syrian government. So imagine what could happen if Syria is faced by another drought after much of its infrastructure has been ravaged by civil war.

And, finally, consider this: “In the future, who will help a country like Syria when it gets devastated by its next drought if we are in a world where everyone is dealing with something like a Superstorm Sandy,” which alone cost the U.S. \$60 billion to clean up? asks Joe Romm, founder of ClimateProgress.org.

So to Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are funding the proxy war in Syria between Sunnis and Shiites/Alawites, all I can say is that you’re fighting for control of a potential human/ecological disaster zone. You need to be working together to rebuild Syria’s resiliency, and its commons, not destroying it. I know that in saying this I am shouting into a dust storm. But there is nothing else worth saying.

The Washington Institute

Avoiding Assad's Forced Solution to the Syria Crisis

[Andrew J. Tabler](#)

January 21, 2014 -- The UN retraction of Iran's invitation to this week's Syria peace talks in Montreux, Switzerland, does little if anything to change the Assad regime's approach to those talks. President Bashar al-Assad's statements in recent days indicate that he and his backers are attempting to pressure the United States and the rest of the "London 11" countries supporting the opposition at the conference -- Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In particular, Damascus hopes to change the framework of the talks from arranging a genuine transition to accepting a forced settlement centered on Assad's upcoming "reelection" for a third seven-year term, which will not take place for at least four months (his current term ends on July 7). Since little is likely to be accomplished at this week's talks, Washington should concentrate on steps the United States and its allies can take regardless of how the talks go, especially in terms of delivering humanitarian assistance to besieged areas and strengthening the moderate Syrian opposition through promotion of local elections.

ASSAD'S REMARKS INDICATE FORCED SOLUTION

In remarks made over the past few days -- first during a meeting with Russian politicians visiting Damascus, and then in an interview with Agence France Press (AFP) -- Assad reiterated the regime's longstanding mantra that it is fighting an international conspiracy waged by terrorist factions against Syria. More important, he outlined how the political mechanism for settling the crisis centers on his reelection. On January 19, Russia's Interfax news agency reported that Assad had told a delegation of visiting Russian parliamentarians that the issue of him giving up power is "not up for discussion." Although the statement was later denied by Syrian state television, Assad told AFP the following day that the "chances of my [presidential] candidacy are significant," and "I must be at the forefront of

those defending this country." He also noted that the process of measuring public opinion on his leadership would commence in "four months' time," when the election date will be announced. Under the Assad family, Syrian elections have been regarded as among the most manipulated in the Arab world. During the last election in 2007, the Baath-dominated parliament rubberstamped Bashar's nomination as the sole candidate, and in the subsequent public referendum to confirm whether he should be president, he received a laughable 97.62 percent of the vote. In order to show devotion to Assad, many voters were forced to mark the "yes" column by pricking their finger and voting in blood.

Following changes to the constitution approved by referendum in February 2012, presidential elections in Syria must now be multicandidate, multiparty contests. Although this may sound like progress, the changes mean little for this year's election. For one thing, candidates must first be approved by the Supreme Constitutional Court, which is appointed by Assad. This fact, coupled with the ongoing state of war, the vast number of displaced citizens, and the heavy role of regime security services in regime-controlled areas, means that the chances of anyone other than Assad winning the next election are zero. As for which factions Assad would be willing to work with in the future, he told AFP that he would only accept parties with a "national agenda" to help "govern the Syrian state," dismissing those in the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and other opposition groups as proxies of regional and Western states participating in the plot against Syria. In his view, anything decided as part of the Geneva process or his own coalition-building efforts would also need to be confirmed by a national referendum run by the regime. Overall, Assad's account of how the next president will be selected and which "opposition parties" will be included is the basis of a forced solution to the Syria crisis masquerading as a democratic process.

LOOPHOLES IN GENEVA 1 COMMUNIQUE

The United States has insisted that Iran cannot attend this week's Syria talks until it accepts a central tenet of the Geneva Communique negotiated between Russian and American officials in June 2012. Section II, paragraph two of the communique states that a "key step" to "any settlement" of the Syria crisis is the formation of a "transitional governing body" (TGB) with "full executive powers" that will create a "neutral

environment in which a transition can take place." Yet Assad and his backers have interpreted this nominally tough provision in a way that guts it of any meaning, emphasizing the portion of Section II that reads, "[The TGB] could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups...formed on the basis of mutual consent." This loophole has allowed Russia to permit, and the United States to resist, Assad's inclusion in the TGB while remaining committed to the Geneva Communique. Although Moscow and Washington have held up the mutual-consent clause as guaranteeing each side's "veto" over a settlement, the lack of specific wording as to which party represents the opposition means that the "present government" (i.e., the Assad regime) need only ally with part of the opposition to move toward a negotiated solution. Given how these loopholes tactically and strategically benefit the Syrian regime and its supporters in Moscow and Beijing, it remains unclear why Iran backtracked on Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's verbal commitments to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in support of the Geneva Communique as a basis for settlement. Perhaps Tehran is concerned that if it accepts the communique, Washington would then highlight the other reason why Iran's presence at the Syria talks is inappropriate -- namely, that it is the only country in the region to have deployed forces on the ground in Syria, most notably personnel from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Qods Force, who have been advising and supporting the Assad regime. Zarif and Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem's recent collective visits to Moscow indicate that Tehran's diplomatic maneuver was a coordinated attempt to change the framework of the Geneva Communique and test American mettle regarding a forced settlement.

Whatever the case, the attempt to include Iran in the talks should come as no surprise -- for months, UN Special Representative for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi has privately and publicly lobbied Western and Arab countries to allow Iran into the Geneva process. While Secretary of State John Kerry has said that Tehran could play some role in settling the Syria crisis, it is unrealistic to expect Iran's leaders to be a positive force when they refuse to acknowledge the international responsibility to help with transition. Tehran has instead clung to the fiction that such decisions are best left to the Syrian people, even as it dispatches Iranian forces to Syria, sends arms

to the Assad regime in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, and orchestrates the presence of thousands of pro-regime fighters in Syria.

AVOIDING TRAPS ON THE LONG DIPLOMATIC ROAD AHEAD

The mechanism for channeling the Syrian people's aspirations toward a settlement that ends the war will not be an election under Assad's rule. Washington and its allies must not indulge Assad's fantasy that his phony election process can yield a "political solution" that will reunite Syria and avoid protracted partition and likely spillover that would threaten regional stability. If the regime and its backers continue to insist on that as the only path, the United States should focus on a mix of short- and long-term tactical and strategic steps -- both at the negotiating table and after -- to improve the chances of a workable settlement. At the Montreux talks, Washington should emphasize unconditional limited ceasefires for the provision of humanitarian aid to besieged areas. Thus far, the regime has proposed that rebels evacuate areas where aid is to be distributed and hand them over to regime control -- in other words, if the opposition chooses to give up, the regime will graciously accept the offer. A strong U.S. stance calling not for surrender, but for true ceasefires that allow the provision of aid, would strengthen the opposition factions attending Geneva II in the eyes of fellow Syrians desperate for food and medical care. This should be accompanied by increased U.S. humanitarian support for opposition-controlled areas via nonregime channels; to date, the vast bulk of U.S. aid has gone through regime-linked institutions. Washington should also encourage local elections in rebel-controlled areas to help the opposition choose a clear set of leaders and consolidate its ranks. As outlined above, the loopholes inherent in the Geneva Communique give Assad room to force a political settlement on his terms. The only way for the opposition to avoid that trap is to make sure the party sitting across the negotiating table from the regime is authoritative, insofar as it represents a majority of those opposed to Assad.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](#).

Now Lebanon

Does the US seek an Arab-Iranian "equilibrium?"

[Hussein Ibish](#)

January 21, 2014 -- American policy in the Middle East has plainly been evolving, but in what direction has been less clear. Analysts have therefore been dutifully reading between the lines of what the risk-averse Obama administration has been doing and saying to try to tease out the new American strategic vision for the region.

Both the administration and the country at large seem ready to reduce the American footprint in the Middle East in favor of other priorities.

However, the extent of that drawdown and, more importantly, what is intended to replace it, have been entirely unclear.

These questions became pressing following the American disengagement with Syrian rebels and embrace of the chemical weapons elimination program. When the US led the international community into an interim agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, they became even more so. Yet these moves only hinted at where American strategy might be headed, and raised more questions than they answered.

President Barack Obama, in his own words, has begun to explain what his administration sees as new American strategic policy goals and postures. And they will not please everyone.

In a sweeping overview of the current state of the Obama presidency, David Remnick has provided one of the first pieces of clear explication of where US grand strategy in the region may be headed, or at least where the administration wants to go.

[Remnick quotes Obama](#) as saying, bluntly, "If we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion... you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare." This vision isn't going to mollify the suspicions of those concerned about Arab Gulf security.

In December, [I speculated](#) that a "plausible, but still from an Arab point of view alarming, scenario is that the US is seeking to create a balance of

power between what amount to Sunni and Shiite regional alliances. Such an equilibrium, this logic holds, would allow the US to start to draw down its own posture in the region and concentrate on the long-ballyhooed 'pivot to Asia.'"

Some have suggested that the US is toying with a "concert of powers" to ensure Gulf security. Others have speculated that without a major American force in the Gulf region, for the meanwhile only Iran can protect vital shipping lanes and this explains the potential Washington-Tehran rapprochement.

Obama's emphasis, however, on a regional "equilibrium" – precisely the term I employed to describe a potential formula through which the US might seek to pull back its own role while avoiding broader chaos – is highly suggestive. Obama doesn't directly say the US is seeking such an equilibrium, but could be seen as implying it.

Moreover, Obama's notion that the goal is to get Iran "to operate in a responsible fashion" suggests not only an end to bad behavior by Tehran, but also that Iran could then potentially be entrusted with key responsibilities.

This doesn't mean that the United States sees Iran as a potential ally or a new partner as some have predicted. But it does seem to suggest that if Iran were to modify its behavior regarding nuclear weapons and funding terrorist organizations it could, and perhaps even should, be regarded as a legitimate regional actor with a major role to play in security based on a Sunni-Shiite "equilibrium."

It's hard not to extrapolate from this a vision of an Iranian foreign policy that is at ease, rather than at odds, with the regional status quo. And for that, Tehran would surely require its own tacitly-recognized sphere of influence: a so-called "Shiite crescent" beginning in southern Afghanistan and sweeping all the way through to southern Lebanon.

And, of course, the centerpiece of such an axis would be Syria, if not under precisely the present regime, at least under a general Iranian hegemony. Hence, the idea of not only a rapprochement with Iran, but also the development of a regional sectarian "equilibrium," might also help to explain an otherwise increasingly passive and self-contradictory American approach to Syria.

Those of us who have worried that US policymakers have come to see

Syria-related issues as a subset of the Iran file will be concerned by the potential implications of Obama's comments to Remnick.

But none of this should be overstated. Obama's comments may have been off-the-cuff or taken out of context, and are so brief and cursory as to be easily open to misinterpretation.

But since this is the first serious attempt that I am aware of by a senior administration official to explain, in public, what the emerging US vision of a new regional order in the Middle East might be, some additional clarification and reassurances would be both wise and welcome.

Hussein Ibish is a columnist at NOW and The National (UAE). He is also a senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine.

[Article 5.](#)

The Christian Science Monitor

As Egypt squeezes Gaza, Hamas looks increasingly cornered

[Christa Case Bryant](#), Ahmed Aldabba

January 21, 2014 -- Gazan Adnan Abu Dalal, a father of seven, spent years dependent on aid after losing his job in [Israel](#) when the second intifada broke out.

He finally found work with a local construction company, but he was left jobless again this summer when [Egypt](#) cracked down on the smuggling tunnels along [Gaza](#)'s southern border. The tunnels secured nearly 70 percent of Gazans' commercial needs, including construction materials, as well as cheap Egyptian fuel that powered everything from generators to wastewater treatment plants.

While life here has been hard for years, there has been a distinct deterioration in recent months. Electricity is down to eight hours a day or less; prices have spiked; the streets have been flooded with sewage on multiple occasions; and unemployment has shot up to 43 percent, up from 23 percent in the first half of 2013.

"I believe pet animals abroad have better lives than ours. I don't care if [Hamas](#) or [Fatah](#) rule, what I need is a bright future for my children," says

Mr. Abu Dalal, who says he is embarrassed that they have to wear last year's school uniforms because he couldn't afford new ones. "The government is careless and the other Arab and foreign countries are doing nothing to end our suffering."

The deterioration comes as Hamas finds itself increasingly squeezed between Israel and Egypt, both of which have been hit hard by terrorist groups operating in the Sinai peninsula and in recent months [have improved military cooperation](#) to tackle the mutual threat. As both countries crack down on terrorist links between Hamas-run Gaza and Sinai, frustration with the increasingly poor conditions in this crowded coastal territory could boil over, presenting an additional threat both to Hamas and its neighbors.

"It's probably the Egyptians to blame, but Israel cannot bury its head in the sand because it does have consequences for Israel as well – there may be spillover from growing frustration of Palestinians," says leading Israeli defense reporter Amos Harel.

Over the past week, there has been an escalation of rocket fire between Gaza and Israel, with a Katyusha attack on the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon last week prompting an Israeli strike on Islamic Jihad operative Ahmad Saad. Hamas is reportedly deploying troops to the Israel-Gaza border to prevent rocket attacks by other factions in the Strip, but that may not be enough to cork the bottled-up frustration. [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Hamas today](#) that Israel would respond forcefully if the spate of rocket attacks did not cease.

"Will [the situation] blow up?" asks Harel. "I think we already see the signs that this is where it's heading. It's no longer a drizzle of one rocket per day."

It's not just causing tensions with Israel, though. It is also putting significant pressure on the Hamas government. Seven years after violently ousting its secular Fatah rivals from the Gaza Strip, Hamas is finding itself in a much weaker position in reconciliation talks.

"Anger with Hamas is boiling, which is basically causing Hamas to rethink its current policy toward Palestinians," says Mukhaimer Abu Saada, professor of political science at Gaza's Al Azhar University.

Pushed toward reconciliation

Last week, Hamas released seven Fatah activists from prison in an effort, leaders said, to create a better atmosphere for reconciliation. Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh also announced that his government would allow Fatah members to return to Gaza.

"Such steps are good and welcomed, but we have an agreement that we both accepted and signed, so I invite Hamas to start implementing them," says Faisal Abu Shalha, a Fatah legislator in Gaza.

Those agreements include recognizing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as interim prime minister of a unity government that would prepare for presidential and parliamentary elections within 90 days of its formation.

"In the past, Hamas had the strength to maneuver and imply its conditions to reach a reconciliation deal," says Prof. Abu Saada. "But now Hamas will have to accept any proposal and give concessions that the movement considered red lines in the past."

The timing of Hamas's outreach may have something to do with the US-led peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, says Talal Okal, a political analyst in Gaza. If a peace agreement is reached when Hamas and Fatah are cooperating, Hamas is more likely to share the political gains and gain international acceptance. It could also partake in the windfall that donors have promised the Palestinian Authority if it signs a peace agreement.

Hamas may also feel less popular pressure to campaign for one of its founding principles: the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation, which many Gazans have stopped talking about. Their conversations now are all about the shortages; shortages of food, gas, electricity, freedom of movement, and human dignity – demonstrating that it's not just economic troubles that weigh on Gazans' minds.

"Money has never been a problem for me, but what would money do for me at war times?" asks Khaled, a young accountant with a BMW and a villa who is thinking of taking a job in Qatar, even though the salary is much lower. "What would money do when I can't go out of Gaza whenever I need to? You may buy a car, an apartment or modern clothes with money, but you can't buy freedom with money."

Changing regional dynamic

In 2011, Hamas abandoned its longtime allies Syria and Hezbollah, thinking that Egypt's ascendant Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies such as Turkey and Qatar would provide badly needed aid and help bolster its legitimacy.

But after the Egyptian coup this summer, Cairo has [openly said it is cracking down](#) not only on the Brotherhood, but Hamas as well. In addition to destroying tunnels, Egypt has also severely limited Gazans' ability to exit at Rafah, Gaza's main access to the outside world.

Israel responded by easing restrictions on people and goods moving through the two crossings it controls, Erez and Kerem Shalom, though with minimal impact. In August, for example, Israel allowed 24 percent more entries through Erez, but that compensated for only 6.5 percent of the Rafah decrease, according to Gisha, an Israeli NGO focusing on Palestinian freedom of movement.

Many Gazans still blame Israel for what they see as a policy of collective punishment carried out in concert with Egypt.

"The people are the ones who really suffer. They have been penalized for doing nothing. By doing this, Israel is not only harming Hamas, but also the common people who are being impoverished by the blockade," says Jamal Khodaty, an independent legislator in Gaza. "The closure has caused social, economic, psychological, and ecology disasters to Gaza. The international should stop speaking about the blockade and start working to lift it, actions speak louder than words."

[Article 6.](#)

The Daily Beast

At Davos 2014, the Gods Of Mischief Rule

Christopher Dickey

January 21-- Even the high and mighty assembling at the Swiss resort recognize, now, that grotesque inequality is the greatest threat to world peace. Their answer: Party on!

Not so long ago and not so very far away, there were people who thought they were masters of the universe. They were very powerful and very rich (and very often both), and each year they got together on a mountaintop in

Switzerland to congratulate themselves, network with each other and confer about how best to bring order and prosperity to humankind. From afar, the confab known as the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos looked a little like Asgard, the mythical home of the Norse gods. Up close, slipping along the icy sidewalks with people partying all night in a hodgepodge of hotels, it looked like Loki, the god of mischief, was running the show.

For decades after the forum was founded in 1971, Davos often appeared a model of disorganization, a 30-ring-circus of panels and plenary sessions, even as the world, with or without its help, looked to be in more or less good order. The Cold War ended; Communism died; technology was spreading opportunities; global trade supposedly was pulling people out of poverty. Even the problems of terrorism and a very shaky euro, while they were disconcerting, seemed manageable.

But tonight as the little resort town begins to welcome 2,500 participants, including more than 40 heads of state, the forum itself is better organized than ever—it's the rest of the world that's not. Nobody at Davos claims to be a master of the universe anymore. Hell, nobody would dare.

There's a sudden shocked revelation on the mountaintop that from the cauldrons of the Middle East to the restive billions in slums around the globe, who have ever less money and ever fewer hopes of change, the politics and the economy of the world as the forum sees it really look very scary indeed.

The group's own publication, [Global Risks 2014](#), concludes that "the chronic gap between the incomes of the richest and poorest citizens" is the greatest threat to stability that looms in the next decade.

The charitable organization Oxfam issued [a report](#), largely based on [statistics](#) compiled by Crédit Suisse, that showed it's not just the infamous "one percent" who own most of the world's wealth, it's an even more minuscule fraction: "The bottom half of the world's population owns the same as the richest 85 people in the world." If I read my calculator right, that would be 0.000001 per cent. No wonder populists and revolutionaries are raising hell, from neo-Nazis in Greece to jihadists in Nigeria.

[Martin Wolf](#) of the Financial Times, a Davos stalwart, likens the situation today to the eve of World War I, exactly a century ago, when the world's rich and its rulers stumbled toward the most horrific conflagration in

history. “Complex societies rely on their elites to get things, if not right, at least not grotesquely wrong,” wrote Wolf, and today, “the elites need to do better. If they do not, rage may overwhelm us all.”

Nowhere is the sense of impending doom stronger than in the Middle East, and much of the thunder in the first two days of Davos is likely to be consumed by another conference at the far end of a lake in another corner of Switzerland. Several countries (but [not Iran](#) are getting together in Montreux with representatives of the Assad regime and some of its fractious opponents to try to begin talking about how they might begin thinking about having a transitional government that could maybe bring an end to the gruesome civil war in Syria.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is supposed to arrive in Davos on Friday to brief the high and mighty gathered there, but hopes are not high, and expectations are even lower.

In the meantime, both Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani will make appearances. In years past, the threat of [war with Iran](#) started by Israel and waged by the United States to stall the mullahs’ nuclear program loomed very large. Less so this year, thanks to the interim deal struck between Iran, the United States and other powers in Geneva a couple of months ago, which went into effect this week.

But while Netanyahu argues that the world must continue to impose ever stronger sanctions on Tehran until it gives up any and all potential for weapons development, Rouhani will be courting investors with the notion that sanctions are loosening and if they get in on the ground floor with investments today, when sanctions are lifted (or crumble), they will make their large fortunes even larger.

On the Asian front, growth is slowing in China while military tensions with Japan are intensifying—a subject on which Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may shed some light at Davos, without, most likely, offering any solution. Africa, from an economic point of view, holds great potential.

Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia will be on the mountaintop to encourage investment in their countries still recovering from genocide and crimes against humanity.

But across the continent new wars keep getting in the way. This week Europe decided to back France’s intervention in the failed state known as

the Central African Republic, but nobody expects the French-led fighting there or in al-Qaeda-plagued Mali to end soon. A bloody conflict in South Sudan is really just beginning. Libya is coming apart at its many seams. Egypt is, well, a very big question mark.

In Latin America, Brazil once looked like it would be a huge engine of growth. Remember the BRICs—those developing economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China—that were supposed to be the powerhouses of the 21st century? The conventional wisdom around Davos is that they are, if not the has-beens, then at least the disappointment of the decade.

The forum sees many other threats on the horizon: The possibility of “Cybergeddon in the online world,” which would mean paralysis for the global neural network. The huge challenge of climate change and the related phenomenon of “extreme weather events” like hurricanes, floods and droughts. And while the fiscal and economic crisis that erupted in 2008 has been contained, everyone knows the world really ain’t the same anymore. Jobs are not being created. And the wealth indicated by rising stock markets is weighing down the pockets of the far-less-than-one percent.

In fact, when one looks at the question of global inequality, the numbers just keep pointing back at the United States as the place where, worldwide, the very greatest amount of resources are owned by the very fewest people. That fact challenges the fundamental assumptions not only of democracy but of a truly open market with equitable opportunities. It’s not what most of us used to think of as “truth, justice, and the American way.” And while these radical imbalances may not bring on another world war, they certainly contribute to the ongoing chaos.

The Oxfam report, trying to be nice to the powers that be at Davos, notes that the “dangerous trend” of inequality “can be reversed.” “The U.S. and Europe in the three decades after World War II reduced inequality while growing prosperous.” But in those same decades, the top individual tax rate in the United States was consistently higher than 90 percent (as you can see on this handy [infographic from Turbotax](#)). The current rate is in the neighborhood of 35 percent and a lot of Americans are convinced, as if it were a religious principle, that even that is too high.

So, forget world leaders—are American leaders ready to fight for better income distribution? Certainly not this week in Asgard, er, Davos. And,

sadly, certainly, not at home either. On the mountain, as on the planet, the god of mischief will continue to rule.

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New York Review of Books

Iran: A Good Deal Now in Danger

[Jessica T. Mathews](#)

January 21, 2014 -- In recent weeks, Iran and the United States, for the first time, have broken through more than a decade of impasse over Iran's nuclear program. Significant differences remain, but at long last, both governments appear ready to work their way toward a resolution. Yet the US Congress, acting reflexively against Iran, and under intense pressure from Israel, seems ready to shatter the agreement with a bill that takes no account of Iranian political developments, misunderstands proliferation realities, and ignores the dire national security consequences for the United States.

By November 2013, when Iran and the P5+1 group (the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany) announced that they had arrived at an interim deal on Iran's nuclear program, it had been thirty-three fractious years since Washington and Tehran had reached any kind of formal agreement.

During that long hiatus, the American enmity and distrust of Iran that stemmed from the 1979 hostage-taking had hardened into a one-dimensional view of the Islamic Republic as wholly malign. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial and vicious rants against the existence of Israel confirmed Americans' worst fears.

On the Iranian side, the list of real and perceived injustices was much longer, beginning with the US-backed overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953, US support for Saddam Hussein during the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, in which as many as one million Iranians may have died, and the destruction of an Iranian civilian airliner and its passengers in 1988. Iranians called the US the Great Satan. The US named Iran as part of the Axis of Evil. For most of these decades, even a

handshake between officials was taboo and an Iranian who advocated improving the relationship could find himself in Evin prison.

The greatest single cause of friction was the growing evidence that in spite of having signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, Iran was in fact pursuing nuclear weapons. For more than fifteen years, intelligence and on-the-ground inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed nuclear facilities, imports of nuclear technology, and research that had no civilian use. The scale of Iran's programs that could have both peaceful and military uses, notably uranium enrichment, was wholly out of proportion to any reasonable civilian need. The IAEA tried for years without success to get answers to a growing list of questions about the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program.

Europeans tried repeatedly to negotiate a solution. In the end, their efforts went nowhere. There were mistakes on the Western side, especially the coupling of extreme demands with minimal incentives for the Iranians. But it also became clear that the Iranian side was not negotiating in good faith. It was simply using the enormous time consumed in fruitless talks to advance its nuclear program.

Through these years American sanctions did slow Iran's progress. During the Bush years the sanctions were largely unilateral because most countries held the view that the US was unreasonably trying to block Iran from nuclear activities that were within the limits of the NPT. Not until President Obama made it plain, beginning in 2009, that the US was willing to enter a serious dialogue with Iran and that it was the mullahs who could not "unclench their fist" did the weight of international opinion swing against the Iranian government. Since then, the United States has led the imposition of broad international sanctions of unprecedented severity. These have slashed Iran's oil exports by nearly two thirds and imposed bans on Iran's banking sector that cut off the country financially. The Iranian rial lost 80 percent of its value. Inflation and unemployment soared. Thus, the sanctions drastically raised the cost to Iran of seeking nuclear weapons in violation of its treaty commitment. In addition to the sanctions, cyberattacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, such as the malware program Stuxnet, assassinations of Iranian scientists, and other covert action also slowed the program's progress. But sanctions were not able to stop Iran from steadily increasing its enrichment of uranium toward the threshold

level to fuel a weapon. Iran had about two hundred centrifuges for enriching uranium operating in 2003. When President Bush left office it had seven thousand. Today it has nine thousand first-generation centrifuges spinning, eight thousand installed and ready to go, and one thousand much more capable second-generation units. Its stockpile of low-enriched uranium—suitable for use both as reactor fuel and for further enrichment—has grown to more than ten thousand kilograms, a tenfold increase since Obama took office. And Iran now has roughly two hundred kilograms of uranium enriched to 20 percent. If that amount were further enriched to the 90 percent level required for a nuclear weapon, it would be close to, but still short of, one bomb's worth.

Exactly how long it would take for Iran to make a dash for a nuclear weapon is unknown. Generally, the limiting step is acquiring enough weapons-grade fuel, so it could be as little as a matter of weeks. However, a single untested weapon is of little or no military value.

2.

Reduced to essentials, the struggles of the past decade come down to a few basic realities, now discernible in both Tehran and Washington. Unilateral sanctions accomplish little. Multilateral sanctions that are broadly enforced can have a devastating impact on the Iranian economy, but even these cannot stop a nuclear program if Tehran chooses to pay the price. Iran has responded to international threats and pressure by increasing its efforts—more centrifuges, new covert facilities, larger stockpiles of enriched fuel. These advances elicit greater foreign pressure, and so on.

No outsider can say for certain that Iran ever definitively chose to become a nuclear weapons state. On the one hand, it has spent billions of dollars pursuing activities that can be rationally explained only if the regime seeks the ability to produce weapons. And as a result Iran has forgone hundreds of billions of dollars worth of oil revenue owing to sanctions.

Yet Tehran has also said that it does not want nuclear weapons. It has argued that nuclear weapons would not be appropriate for an effective military strategy and that they would violate the principles of the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, at one point issued a fatwa to this effect. US intelligence concluded in 2007 and has reaffirmed twice since that while Iran continued to enrich uranium beyond its civilian needs, it had abandoned its weapons program some years

earlier. No country is a monolith, especially not Iran, a country with a byzantine, multilayered political system. Some officials may have wanted Iran to be a nuclear weapons state. Others may have wanted the so-called “Japan option,” to be technologically able to make nuclear weapons but stop short of doing so. It is possible that a single, definitive choice was never reached or that it has changed over the years. It is also possible that nuclear weapons capability has been the certain goal throughout. But Iran has been unambiguous in insisting on its right to uranium enrichment. As international opposition to its nuclear activities deepened, enrichment—allegedly for peaceful purposes—became the symbol Iranian officials fastened onto in their defense of the program. They portrayed it as a matter of national pride, international standing, and technological prowess: arguments that command strong public support in Iran. For some years it has become clear that if a negotiated settlement to the nuclear standoff was ever to be reached, allowing Tehran some degree of enrichment would have to be a part of it. After all the resources that have been spent, international acceptance of Iran’s enrichment program would be the measure by which Iran’s leaders could claim victory to their public. Those like Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who insist that the only acceptable level is zero enrichment in Iran know, or should know, that they are using code for “no deal would be acceptable.”

Beyond that, however, the question that has elicited so much misplaced passion, of whether Iran has the “right” to enrichment, is a red herring. There is no formal, legal “right” to enrichment or any other nuclear activity. All that the NPT says is that parties to the treaty have “the inalienable right...to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination.” Enrichment is certainly encompassed within these words but the qualifier—“for peaceful purposes”—is crucial. If the world becomes convinced that a non-nuclear weapons state’s activities are directed toward acquiring nuclear weapons, such activities thereby become illegal. So while Iran cannot claim a legal “right” to enrich, it can claim the right to do so in the colloquial sense, for it is a fact that eight other non-nuclear weapons states—Japan, Brazil, Argentina, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Belgium, and Italy—currently enrich uranium without international complaint. None of them would willingly give up the option to do so.

We might wish in hindsight that the NPT had been written so as to tightly restrict dangerous, dual-use technologies like enrichment that provide direct access to weapons fuel. But as the law stands today, there is no ground for restricting a peaceful nuclear program in Iran to zero enrichment. The question is whether the program can be restricted to peaceful activities and whether the world can be assured that it will stay that way.

3.

By the beginning of 2013, the tit for tat exchanges of international pressure and Iranian progress on the ground had escalated to nearly twenty thousand centrifuges in Iran, more than one hundred billion dollars in sanctions, and growing talk of war. Three paths forward were possible: more of the same, leading eventually to an Iran that is either a declared or an implicit nuclear weapons state; a negotiated resolution; or an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. All have high costs. Some would have hideous consequences. As their merits are debated, the question "Good or bad as compared to what?" must constantly be asked, for these are the only three choices.

A case can be made that the world, including the US and Israel, could live with a nuclear-armed Iran. History proves that deterrence and containment work. But it also points to the fact that proliferation doesn't happen one state at a time. It proceeds in clumps. The US and USSR prompted China to go nuclear. China prompted India to do so, which in turn prompted Pakistan. Brazil and Argentina began to cross the line together and stepped back together. Even if deterrence kept Iran from ever using a nuclear weapon, it is likely that nuclear weapons in Iran would prompt others in the region to follow suit in an effort to equalize power. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt are the most likely.

The Middle East is already riven by the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, by Sunni-Shia rivalry, and by the divisions and distress unleashed by the Arab Awakening. The prospect of nuclear weapons in the hands of several states—not only Israel and Iran but others as well—can only be contemplated with dismay. Moreover, a nuclear Middle East would probably lead to proliferation elsewhere. Only four countries have crossed the nuclear line since the original five nuclear powers half a century ago. If three or four were quickly added to the list, it could well mean the end to the decades-long international effort to halt proliferation.

This effect on proliferation in the region and beyond is enough to make a nuclear Iran a clearly undesirable outcome. There are, then, two remaining choices: an agreement or an attack. A negotiated agreement would be imperfect. Sustained vigilance would be required, and a degree of risk would remain, for an agreement would be a compromise, not a surrender. So one might begin by asking whether an attack looks more promising. Even the strongest proponents of air strikes against Iran's known nuclear facilities do not argue that the result would guarantee anything more than a delay—perhaps two years or somewhat longer—in Iran's program. Facilities can be rebuilt and physicists and engineers would continue to have the expertise needed to make nuclear weapons. After years of effort, Iran can now make at home most of what it needs to build a bomb. When the program is rebuilt after an attack there would be no IAEA inspectors and no cameras to monitor its advance, since monitoring depends on cooperation. As outsiders attempted to track the reconstituted program and prepare for another round of attacks, they would know far less than we do today about the scale, scope, and location of what is happening. The political consequences would be longer lasting. An attack is likely to unite the country around the nuclear program as never before. The hardest of Iran's ideological hard-liners would be strengthened against those who had advocated restraint and reconciliation, thereby radicalizing and probably prolonging clerical rule. Following air strikes, it would be easy for Iranian leaders to make the case that the country faces unrelenting international enmity and must acquire nuclear weapons in order to deter more attacks.

Some advocates of war have evoked rosy but utterly unconvincing scenarios in which Iran's current regime collapses after a limited air attack and is then succeeded by a government that suddenly cries uncle. Such an argument is hard to make with a straight face. Only an invasion with ground troops, followed by a long occupation (in a country of some 80 million people, three times the size of Iraq), could force an end to the Islamic Republic. Otherwise, the odds are overwhelming that a successor government, if one were to take power, would be more, not less, committed to acquiring nuclear weapons.

The broader geopolitical and strategic consequences would depend entirely on what prompted the attack. Going to war against an Iran that is making a

dash to actually build nuclear weapons might have substantial international support. An attack on Iran because it refused to give up uranium enrichment, however, would be very widely seen as illegitimate. It would be another preventive war, like America's invasion of Iraq, against a potential, future threat. Unlike a preemptive response to an imminent threat, preventive war has no international legitimacy.

If an attack were made, in effect against enrichment, the sanctions now in place against Iran would collapse. Countries like Russia, China, Turkey, India, and Japan that have adopted the oil and financial sanctions against Iran with varying degrees of reluctance are unlikely to sustain them to support a war against enrichment. If Iran were seen as seeking or upholding a negotiated solution when it was attacked, the attackers would likely find themselves international outcasts.

Iran could retaliate in many ways—through direct military action and by using Hezbollah and other proxies in terrorist acts. Even apart from those consequences, a military attack that leaves Iran without inspections and without effective sanctions while radicalizing its government and convincing much of its public that only nuclear weapons could defend them, all for the delay of a few years in its program, would be irrational, except, perhaps, as a last resort. Even then, balancing the pluses and minuses of such a war against those of living with a nuclear Iran is for many analysts a very close call.

4.

This brings the story to the stunning surprises of 2013, beginning with Iran's June election in which Hassan Rouhani, confounding poll results and universal expectations, won a majority among six presidential candidates, with just over half of the vote.

Iran has a bizarre combination of authoritarian rule and active politics. Thus the Guardian Council, under the direction of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, disqualified 678 of the 686 individuals who applied to run for office. Yet in the campaign, those who did get to run took specific positions and vigorously debated them. The foreign policy debate, televised nationwide, went on for three hours. Voter turnout at 75 percent was almost half again higher than in the United States in 2012.

Rouhani campaigned for greater moderation in government, "an end to extremism," and flexibility in reaching a nuclear accommodation in order

to end Iran's international isolation and stalled economy. A cleric and senior member of the ruling inner circle and a personal friend of the Supreme Leader for forty years, he is an advocate for change in both foreign and domestic policy, but very much a member of Iran's political establishment. Speaking fluent English, he served as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator a decade ago.

The mandate of the election was clear—not to dismantle nuclear facilities, end enrichment, or surrender Iran's rights as Iranians see them, but to seek an agreement through flexibility and moderation. The Supreme Leader underlined the point, calling for “heroic flexibility.” And while the outcome of the election was greeted with joyous celebrations in the streets, Rouhani has powerful enemies, the Revolutionary Guard among them, who have made no secret of their hope that he will fail. He has to deliver results reasonably soon, or he will be ousted.

His first step was to appoint Iran's most talented diplomat as foreign minister. Javad Zarif impressed the world in his years as Iran's representative to the UN; after living for many years in the US, he understands its politics well. With the Supreme Leader's blessing, Rouhani then transferred the nuclear portfolio from the hard-line Supreme National Council to the Foreign Ministry, which reports to him. He changed the government's tone radically. Though still an enemy, Israel was no longer “the Zionist entity” but the state of Israel. Just after he won the election, Rouhani tweeted a picture of himself visiting an American-supplied field hospital in southeastern Iran some years before.

Initially, these and other moves were dismissed by critics as a “charm offensive.” In an unusually intemperate speech to the General Assembly, Netanyahu warned that Rouhani was a “wolf in sheep's clothing” set on duping the international community. But as the weeks passed and Iranian acts added up, most had to conclude that, unlikely as it seemed against the pattern of past decades, this was in fact an Iranian administration with new goals that had, at least for a time, the backing of the Supreme Leader. Through the fall, negotiations in Geneva accelerated, often stretching around the clock. On November 24 came the announcement of a first-phase, six-month nuclear deal to be followed by a more comprehensive, permanent agreement six months or a year later.

The essential elements of a bargain acceptable to the P5+1 negotiators were well defined in advance. To prevent Iran from once again using the negotiations to buy time to advance its program, Tehran would have to agree to halt production of 20 percent highly enriched uranium. It would have to keep its capacity for enrichment stable by stopping the operation or the installation of additional advanced centrifuges. It would have to halt progress on the reactor under construction at Arak that is designed to produce plutonium, also a weapons fuel. Specifically that reactor could not be fueled or turned on so that, if the agreement were ever violated, it could be bombed without spreading radiation.

The actual agreement goes far beyond this. Most important, and perhaps most unexpected, Iran agreed to eliminate its existing stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium either by diluting it down to low enrichment or converting it to an oxide form that is not adaptable for further enrichment. Netanyahu had famously held up a cartoon poster of a bomb before the General Assembly with a red line drawn across it at the threshold level of 90 percent enriched uranium. The agreement takes Iran's less enriched stockpile to zero.

The terms also provide that Iran can build no additional centrifuges except to replace broken ones. While existing centrifuges may continue to spin, the product must be converted to oxide so that Iran's stock of low-enriched uranium does not grow. The agreement bans the testing or production of fuel and new components for Arak and requires Iran to turn over important design information that will help the IAEA safeguard the reactor there. To strengthen the assurance that all this will happen, the agreement requires daily access for inspectors as well as downloads from cameras used for surveillance, including at the Fordow underground enrichment plant. To reduce the possibility that Iran could be running covert, hidden fuel cycles, it extends monitoring for the first time to uranium mines and mills and to centrifuge production and assembly facilities. These inspections are unprecedented in both frequency and extent.

In return, the P5+1 agree to lift about \$7 billion worth of sanctions, though leaving the most important oil and financial sanctions in place. Further, the US and its allies pledge not to impose any new nuclear-related sanctions while the agreement is in effect.

There is much left to be dealt with in the permanent agreement. In the view of the P5+1 negotiators, Iran must permanently cap enrichment at 5 percent and reduce the size of its stockpile, which holds far more low-enriched uranium than it needs for any foreseeable peaceful purpose. Similarly, the total number of centrifuges needs to be proportional to civilian needs. The Arak reactor must be defanged—most likely converted to a different design. And the final agreement must deal with Parchin and perhaps other facilities where research and development directly related to making weapons are believed to have taken place.

What remains to be done does not diminish the historic dimension of what has been achieved. After more than a decade of failed negotiations and, for the US and Iran, three decades of unproductive silence, diplomacy is working. As of January 20, 2014, the short-term agreement is in full effect. Twenty percent enrichment is suspended. If the agreement is sustained by both sides, Iran's enrichment progress will be halted and in important respects rolled back. The time it would take to break out and dash for a nuclear weapon is lengthened by perhaps two months and the new inspection requirements mean earlier warning of danger and more time to respond. In return, the P5+1 gave remarkably little. Indeed, this deal only becomes attractive for Tehran if it is followed by a permanent agreement that brings major relief from sanctions.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Netanyahu greeted the agreement with a barrage of criticism. Even before it was completed he called it a “Christmas present” for Iran; later, “a historic mistake.” His too attentive audience on Capitol Hill followed suit. Many of the criticisms suggest that the critics haven't appreciated the terms of the agreement. Senator Charles Schumer dismissed it as “disproportionate.” The observation is correct, but upside down, for Iran gave far more than it got.

Others vaguely suggest that Iran will inevitably cheat. To oppose the deal on this ground, one would have to be able to explain why Rouhani, if his intention were to cheat, would sign a deal that focuses the world's attention on Iran's nuclear behavior and imposes unprecedented inspections and monitoring. What would be the logic in that? Iran has inched forward successfully for years. Why invite severe retribution by making an explicit deal with the world's major powers and then violating it?

More serious are those who, wittingly or not, argue that there should be no deal. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, for one example, demands that Iran “irreversibly dismantle its nuclear stockpile [i.e., of enriched nuclear fuel] and not be allowed to continue enrichment.” Those who take this view must either believe against all experience that Iran can be threatened into submission or favor a war whose foreseeable costs are wildly disproportionate to its possible gain. The less attractive explanation is that such critics are not thinking beyond the immediate satisfaction of railing against Iran—a kneejerk political habit after thirty years—and scoring political points (and campaign dollars) as a resolute supporter of Israel. A bill that is so convoluted and poorly drafted that many don’t understand that it would automatically apply new sanctions has gained fifty-nine cosponsors in the Senate—close to veto-proof support. The language violates the first-phase agreement by imposing new sanctions (if, for example, a Hezbollah attack anywhere in the world were to damage US property) and makes a permanent agreement unachievable by apparently requiring the complete dismantling of all enrichment facilities.

The bill’s authors, Senators Robert Menendez and Mark Kirk, argue that it strengthens the president’s hand. It does the reverse by making even more acute Iranian doubts that the president can deliver the relief from sanctions they are negotiating for. Its passage, as an act of bad faith on the US’s part after having just agreed not to impose new sanctions during the term of the six-month deal, would probably cause Iran to walk away from the negotiations. Rouhani would risk political suicide at home if he did not. Alternatively, in the all too familiar pattern of the past decade, he might stay at the negotiating table and match unacceptable American demands with his own so that blame for failure would be muddled. America’s negotiating partners and others whose support makes the sanctions work would feel the sting of bad faith as well. The sanctions regime that has been so painstakingly built through ten years of effort by determined American leaders of both parties could easily unravel.

The bill’s most egregious language explains why so many senators leapt onto this bandwagon: it has become a vehicle for expressing unquestioning support for Israel, rather than a deadly serious national security decision for the United States. The US, according to this provision, “should stand with Israel and provide...diplomatic, military, and economic support”

should Israel launch a preventative war against Iran in what it deems to be self-defense. Though this language is in the nonbinding “Findings” section of the bill, its sense is to partially delegate to the government of Israel a decision that would take the United States to war with Iran. Senators report that AIPAC’s advocacy of the bill has been intensive, even by its usual standard.

In the end, this seemingly complicated story is actually quite simple. For the first time in decades, the US has an opportunity to test whether it can reach a settlement with Iran that would turn what may still be an active weapons program into a transparent, internationally monitored, civilian program. The pressure of multilateral sanctions, the president’s willingness to engage in serious negotiations, and the change in Iran’s domestic politics have come together to produce this moment. A final agreement is by no means assured, but the opportunity is assuredly here. The price of an agreement will be accepting a thoroughly monitored, appropriately sized enrichment program in Iran that does not rise over 5 percent. The alternatives are war or a nuclear-armed Iran. Should this be a hard choice? Astonishingly, too many members of Congress seem to think so.

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