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Possible Scenarios and Strategic Options vis-à-vis Iran

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The likely agreement between Iran and the P5+1, based on the parameters announced by the US State Department on April 2, 2015 after the talks in Lausanne, is problematic but not necessarily the worst case scenario that could emerge in the context of Iran's nuclear program. The starting point for comparing the various scenarios is not one in which Iran has zero nuclear capabilities, but one in which Iran has been – however illegitimately – a nuclear threshold state since the beginning of the current decade. Iran possesses a nuclear infrastructure it constructed over the last 10 years, i.e., the components and know-how to put together a nuclear bomb. Iran has 19,000 centrifuges, of which 9,000 enrich uranium, 10 tons of low grade enriched uranium (enough fissile material for 7-8 bombs after enrichment to a higher grade), two underground enrichment facilities, a power reactor in Bushehr also capable of producing plutonium, a heavy water plutonium reactor under construction in Arak, and an infrastructure of know-how, R&D, and covert activity dedicated to weapons development. The emerging agreement does not permit Iran to develop nuclear weapons, neither in 10-25 years, nor thereafter. An Iranian decision to develop nuclear weapons in 2025 or 2030, when most restrictions imposed by the agreement are scheduled to be lifted, would still represent a violation of the agreement and of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, obligating a forceful international response.

Israel views Iran with nuclear weapons as a threat to its security of the highest order, if not an outright existential threat. Already today, before an agreement between Iran and the world powers has been signed, Iran is only 2-3 months away from the bomb, should it decide to break out to nuclear weapons. Therefore, an acceptable agreement with Iran would have to keep it at least 2-3 years away from the bomb. It thus behooves Israeli policy to focus, first and foremost, on improving the parameters of the emerging agreement. At the same time, Israel must work with the United States to promote agreements and a coordinated plan of action, and perhaps also to anchor understandings in a formal agreement that would provide solutions to the problematic scenarios and dangers inherent in an Iranian breakout, with or without a final agreement. In particular,

Israel must strive to receive guarantees that there will be suitable solutions to the risks that an agreement with Iran poses to it, and to reach an agreement with the United States about strengthening Israel's security and political standing in case the optimistic scenario envisioned by the US administration does not materialize.

An analytical model to guide the respective leaders of the United States and Israel – leaders who view Iran armed with nuclear bombs as unacceptable – is one that focuses on the question that must be asked at every point in time: have we reached “the junction” where we must choose between two problematic alternatives, each replete with negative outcomes and appalling ramifications – accepting Iran with nuclear arms or taking military action to prevent Iran from arming itself with nuclear weapons? If we believe that we have not yet reached such a decision making junction and that there are alternatives that can keep Iran from producing nuclear weapons that are neither “the bomb” nor “bombardment,” they are to be preferred. Such alternatives could take the form of a reasonable agreement, extreme sanctions that would change the balance of Iran's calculus, secret activity against the Iranian nuclear program, or regime change in Tehran.

I believe that if Prime Minister Netanyahu determines we are at the point where a decision must be made on accepting a military nuclear Iran or stopping it using military force, he would do what it takes to stop Iran militarily. I also assume that if President Obama or any other subsequent US president realizes that the Iranians are in fact breaking out to the bomb, he or she will stand behind Obama's promise to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons and prefer “prevention” over “containment.” However, United States enthusiasm for reaching an agreement has severely weakened the administration's position in the negotiations, and therefore this second assumption must be validated. The reasoning used by administration spokespeople to justify the interim agreement signed with Iran and the parameters for the final agreement that were made public greatly eroded the US commitment whereby “all options are on the table.” Based on their statements, it was possible to understand that if the administration assessed it was at the crucial junction, there would be little likelihood it would choose to bomb Iran rather than see Iran with the bomb.

Below are six scenarios. Three assume a failure to reach an agreement by the target date of June 30, 2015, and three assume an agreement is reached. For each of the six scenarios, the essay describes different projected Iranian conduct, with the understanding that this is the most difficult variable to predict. For every scenario, the essay attempts to analyze the circumstances whereby the difficult junction of the “the bomb” or “to bomb” decision is reached, and the extent to which each of the scenarios is either preferable or less desirable than the current situation in which Iran already possesses nuclear threshold capabilities. The analysis assumes that an agreement will include all the parameters made

public by the State Department, with requisite improvements in limiting nuclear R&D in Iran and with the addition of full transparency regarding the nuclear program's military dimensions, as well as full verification of Iranian nuclear conduct at every site and at any time, as stipulated by the agreement.

The Talks Fail

Scenario 1: The interim agreement de facto becomes the permanent agreement. The failure to reach a final agreement would stem from the gaps between the sides in their interpretations of the Lausanne parameters. An Iranian insistence on the immediate lifting of the sanctions, limited supervision, continued aggressive R&D, and the refusal to provide satisfactory answers to questions about the military dimensions of the nuclear program would necessarily lead to a breakdown of the talks. Nonetheless, the underlying assumption of this scenario is that both sides would be careful not to create a profound crisis and would declare their commitment to the spirit of the interim agreement – the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) concluded in November 2013 and implemented in January 2014 – while continuing the talks in some format or another. In practice, the interim agreement would evolve into a permanent agreement. In this situation, Iran would be closer to the bomb (2-3 months away) than in an agreement based on the Lausanne parameters (1 year away from the bomb for the first 10 years after the agreement is signed); there would be no restrictions on developing advanced centrifuges and operating them; and there would be no restrictions on the construction of additional reactors. Supervision would be partial and not involve implementation of the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol. The key question in this scenario is Iran's ability to function under the existing sanctions regime, i.e., to continue to pay the price of the sanctions. This scenario could be realized only if the US Congress adopts a moderate approach when it comes to legislating further sanctions and if the Iranians decide they can continue to absorb the burden of the current sanctions while hoping that as time passes, they can bypass them and/or the current sanctions regime will dissolve.

The Israeli government must ask itself if this scenario is preferable to an agreement. If it is assessed that Iran can preserve its nuclear program given the current sanctions, this scenario is more problematic than an agreement. While Iranian nuclear activity will not be granted legitimacy and the sanctions imposed on it will not be lifted so that the Iranians will not receive more resources for their negative Middle East activity, the fact is that an illegitimate Iran under sanctions still managed to develop a much more extensive and dangerous infrastructure than Iran will have under the Lausanne agreement parameters. Moreover, it is doubtful that in this scenario, the US administration would feel it had arrived at "the junction"; it is doubtful it would increase pressure on Iran or take military action against it. Even though the Israeli government initially denounced the interim agreement in 2013, by the following year it readily accepted extension of the agreement and continued talks with the Iranians, given the more problematic alternatives

such as resumed Iranian progress toward the bomb or a bad agreement. Thus technically speaking and in terms of the breadth and depth of the Iranian nuclear program, an agreement based on the Lausanne parameters is better than the interim agreement becoming the de facto permanent agreement. If the JPOA remains in force, the Iranians will be left with a significant reserve of 10 tons of uranium enriched to 3.5 percent, as well as 19,000 centrifuges, which means a very short breakout time. The only strategic rationale for preferring this alternative would be an assessment that the current sanctions will continue to hurt Iran so much that it will be forced to accept even more restrictive parameters of their nuclear program.

Scenario 2: The talks fail while Iran withdraws from the JPOA and expands its nuclear infrastructure though still without breaking out to the bomb. In this scenario, Iran ends its commitment to the interim agreement and renews the full scope of expanding and improving its nuclear program but still without denying its commitment to the NPT. Iran would operate advanced centrifuges, enlarge its stockpile of enriched material, resume enrichment to the 20 percent grade, not implement the Additional Protocol, and begin operating the heavy water reactor in Arak. As a result, its breakout time would be reduced to zero as early as 2016, rather than 2028 as estimated by President Obama in his interview with National Public Radio. Such conduct on Iran's part would most assuredly lead to harsher sanctions on Iran, but it is safe to assume that the President would still not define this moment as "the junction" for making the fateful decision. The US administration has already demonstrated that it can live with extensive Iranian nuclear capabilities as long as in practice the Iranians do not break out toward the bomb. For Israel, which has determined it cannot live with an Iran capable of breaking out to the bomb on short notice, this would be a very problematic scenario and would support the assessment that Israel was already at the decision making junction. This scenario would appear to be more problematic for Israel than a formulation of an agreement based on the Lausanne parameters (with the requisite amendments). In any case, before taking action, Israel would have to consider the effectiveness of the added sanctions that would be imposed on Iran, their chances of bringing Iran back to the negotiating table, and the prospects for generating a better agreement in those renewed talks.

Scenario 3: The talks fail and Iran decides to break out to the bomb, to withdraw from the NPT, and/or to work covertly to attain the bomb. In response to the failure to reach an agreement and to the subsequent harsher sanctions, Iran would announce its withdrawal from the NPT and/or decide to produce nuclear weapons. One may assume the Iranians would justify this step by claiming that nuclear weapons are their only way to ensure Iranian security and that as a rising world power it is their right to have the same weapons possessed by the world powers and other nations in Iran's vicinity. This is a severe crisis scenario that would immediately position both the United States and Israel

at the decision making “junction.” Judging whether this scenario is preferable to an agreement would depend on a comparison between future outcomes of an agreement with Iran on the one hand (see the next three scenarios), and the effectiveness and outcomes of an attack that would be carried out to block Iran’s access to the bomb, on the other.

The Talks End in an Agreement

Scenario 4: The negotiations conclude on the basis of the Lausanne parameters, a positive dynamic develops between Iran and the world powers, and over the next 10-15 years Iran grows more moderate and stops working toward nuclear weapons.

This is the optimistic scenario that the US administration hopes will materialize. In this scenario, Iran would gradually be welcomed back into the fold of the family of nations and would uphold the letter and the spirit of the agreement it made with the world powers, on the basis of an understanding that nuclear weapons are not an asset but a burden. Although Iran, even after a decade, would remain just one year away from the bomb, the tracks to a nuclear bomb – the uranium track, the plutonium track, and the covert track – would be blocked and tightly supervised. In this scenario, Iran could, after 10 years, expand its nuclear infrastructure in Natanz, but according to the agreement would not enrich to a grade above 3.67 percent, would not amass materials above a negligible amount of 300 kg, would not operate the Fordow enrichment site, and would persuade the international community it was a nation with civilian nuclear capabilities maintaining the principles of the NPT and effectively supervised by the IAEA’s expanded Additional Protocol.

If the world powers were also capable of preventing nuclear proliferation in other Middle East nations, this scenario is undoubtedly preferable to the current state of affairs in which Iran is already only a few months away from the bomb, and certainly to a situation in which it will have a much expanded nuclear infrastructure in 2030 without an agreement. This scenario would relieve the necessity of choosing among two bad alternatives – “the bomb” or “bombardment” – at the fateful decision making junction.

Scenario 5: Iran keeps the agreement but does not concede its strategic objective, namely, having the ability to develop the bomb at any given time and on as short notice as possible. The underlying assumption of this scenario is that there will be no change in the regime and that Iran, in addition to continuing its negative activities in the Middle East (striving for regional hegemony, being involved in subversion, supporting terrorism, and working to destroy Israel), will also cling to the desire to be able to decide, at a moment’s notice, to develop a nuclear bomb without the world being able to do anything about it. At the end of the 10 years of restrictions imposed by the agreement, Iran reassembles – legitimately, according to the agreement – all 13,000 centrifuges dismantled by the agreement, and sets a goal of achieving 54,000 centrifuges (including advanced models) – the full capacity of the Natanz facility – by year 15 of the agreement.

In this scenario, Iran installs the thousands of advanced centrifuges it has developed during the years of the agreement, and prepares 3,000 advanced centrifuges in Fordow in year 15 of the agreement, which allows it to return to full activity in this well-fortified site. In year 15 of the agreement, Iran can also start amassing enriched material above the 300 kg limit and increase the grade of enrichment to 20 percent. It is clear that exactly as President Obama predicted in his NPR interview, the breakout time would be very close to zero already in year 13 year of the agreement, and certainly by year 15. In 2025, the Israeli Prime Minister and the US President would undoubtedly be much closer to “the junction” and would have to decide whether or not to act before the scope and immunity of the Iranian nuclear program would leave the decision on the development of nuclear arms solely in the hands of a problematic, hostile Iranian regime. The decision to act would be difficult because the Iranians would not have deviated from the agreement, while at the same time it would be clear that non-action on the part of the world powers would mean an Iranian bomb in virtually no time at all and at a time considered optimal from the regime’s point of view.

The most important question is: will the United States, hopeful that the optimistic fourth scenario is realized but in reality encountering the problematic fifth scenario, be capable of acting against Iran without Iran having violated the agreement and before it has gone the last mile to the bomb, i.e., activity focused on high grade enrichment and the development of bomb delivery systems? By contrast, Israel would presumably be free to act because it is not a party to the agreement. Moreover, counter-intuitively, in this scenario military action against the Iranian nuclear program in 2025 would in all probability not be much more complicated or difficult than in 2015. Before the Iranian nuclear infrastructure is expanded over the duration of the agreement, between 2025 and 2027, the Iranian program will be reduced compared to what it is today, intelligence about it will be better, and it will be less immune than it is at present. On the other hand, in another 10-12 years, it may be that the Iranians will have developed new aerial defense systems and additional fortifications that would pose a challenge to an Israeli military operation.

Scenario 6: Iran operates covertly in violation of the agreement, whittles away at it, and in the extreme case breaks out toward the bomb. In this scenario, either before or after the end of the agreement, the Iranians are caught cheating, acting in violation of their commitment to the NPT or the dictates of the agreement, and working toward achieving the bomb. Developing weapon systems and/or enriching to a high grade could be carried out either overtly or covertly. In such a case, it would seem that both Israel and the United States would find themselves at the decision making “junction,” i.e., either acquiescing to Iran armed with nuclear weapons or taking counter-action. If both nations cling to their mantra that all options are on the table and that they will not allow Iran to have the bomb, it is clear that this scenario offers them the legitimacy to act in virtually

any situation before 2027 (the earliest by which Iran is expected to return to its 2015 capabilities). Again, the military mission would not be more complex than it is in 2015; perhaps the opposite would be the case: the Iranian program would be more exposed and less extensive than it is now, and the Israeli and US intelligence and offensive capabilities would be better than they are at present.

Conclusion

The six scenarios analyzed here indicate that an agreement between the world powers and Iran on the Iranian nuclear program based on the Lausanne parameters with necessary improvements (a detailed addition to refer to R&D, responses to the weapons aspects of the program, and supervision of every site at any time) is preferable to the current situation, even if it is not “a good deal.” The alternative to the improved Lausanne agreement would consist of severe and effective sanctions that may possibly result in a better agreement but might also lead to the realization of the dangers inherent in a failure of the talks, Iran’s continued nuclear activity, and even a decision by the Tehran regime to break out to the bomb. By contrast, an agreement would make it possible in another 10-12 years to gauge whether the Iranian regime has become more moderate or has stayed exactly the same and is still vying for nuclear arms. If that happens, it would be possible to take action against the nuclear program under improved operational conditions and possibly also under conditions of enhanced legitimacy. Perhaps the possibility of a special defense agreement between Israel and the United States should be investigated, one that would be limited to the Iranian nuclear issue alone, thereby bypassing the obstacles preventing the signing of a comprehensive defense agreement between the two countries.

In case an agreement based on the Lausanne parameters is achieved, the worst scenario is not necessarily the one in which Iran violates the agreement or breaks out toward the bomb, but rather the one in which Iran maintains the letter of the agreement and does not provide the United States with a legitimate reason for preventing Iran from being zero time away from a bomb, backed by a large, advanced, and immune nuclear program. In that scenario, only the Israeli government, which is not a party to the agreement, would be at the difficult decision making juncture – the same crossroads it is at today unless an agreement is reached.

That said, Israel is running out of time to formulate a strategy until either an agreement is signed or the talks end in failure. Therefore, it is recommended that the Prime Minister discuss the strategy of action required by each of the scenarios analyzed above, and urgently formulate a corollary agreement with the United States that would include understandings for each of the scenarios. These understandings would have to relate to the clarifications required for the Lausanne parameters as well as a promise that there would be no further concessions to Iranian demands, as was hinted at after the public

presentation of the document of principles formulated in Lausanne. Other topics requiring clarification and policy formulation are how to deal with Iran's negative non-nuclear activity of and how future demands for other nuclear programs in Middle East states would be handled, restricted, and supervised. Such demands are another strategic danger that will develop if an agreement with Iran, based on the parameters of the Lausanne declaration, is signed.

The scenarios analyzed in this essay can serve as the foundation for a comprehensive, professional strategic discussion that should be held now between Israel and the United States. Analyzing the complex ramifications, as detailed above, should allow the formulation of the required components of a final future agreement and the construction of the bilateral strategy most appropriate to the problematic scenarios and crisis situations. These difficult situations are highly likely to develop after an agreement is reached between the world powers and Iran in various contexts of the Iranian nuclear program.

