

# COMMENTARY

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## **Disingenuous Debate on Iran Negotiations**

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The Iran “framework agreement” reached a couple of weeks ago has preoccupied this country, and especially American Jews. I’m somewhat puzzled by the depth of the controversy (except for the purely political reaction by those who think Obama is the devil incarnate), because, given the range of choices available, I don’t think it’s a difficult choice. In fact, it is barely a choice at all, contrary, for example, to the opinion piece in Washington Post by Israel’s Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon.

Ya’alon attempts to debunk the numerous safeguards in the framework draft and asserts, with not a shred of evidence presented, that a “better” deal is attainable, one that “significantly rolls back Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and links the lifting of restrictions on its nuclear program to an end of Iran’s aggression in the region, its terrorism across the globe and its threats to annihilate Israel.” There is a better chance of Bibi Netanyahu and Hamas leader Khalid Masha'al drinking four cups of wine together next Passover than of Iran agreeing to that. Ya’alon, a former IDF Chief of Staff, may have been a successful military commander, but if he believes that this is reachable without war (which I doubt he really does), his political and diplomatic comprehension is, simply, not credible.

Not that I think fears are inappropriate, nor do I “pooh-pooh” Iran as a danger to the world and to Israel, as a friend accused me at synagogue last Shabbat. But there has been enough commentary since the framework was announced to judge what the pros and cons are, and the pros overwhelmingly outweigh the cons. I would even disagree with my friend Gershom Gorenberg’s assessment that it is the “least bad deal.” It is not ideal (it’s a compromise, isn’t it?); it is not foolproof (name something in international relations that is); it does not absolutely guarantee Israel’s safety (what could?). But it is a reasonably good framework for a deal, in that it removes the immediate danger of an Iranian bomb and provides serious safeguards against cheating.

For me, however, one of its main positives, which others unaccountably decry as a negative, is that it offers Iran a feasible path back to inclusion in the international community, which is the only real way of preventing a war in the long term.

There is lots of evidence that significant parts of Iran's elite, as well as most of its population, want Iran to return to a path of international acceptance, trade, and prosperity. There is also appreciable evidence to the contrary, especially emanating from the Revolutionary Guard and the clerical establishment. Which group do we want to succeed? It is a no-brainer to say the former, but those opposing the framework seem to be firmly supporting the latter. Actually, they purport to see no difference between them, which flies in the face of reality, experience, and common sense, as well as any review of the facts.

President Rouhani is an immense contrast to former President Ahmadinejad, who did his best to fulfil every anti-Semite's wet dreams as well as those of Jews and would-be philo-Semites who see anti-Semitism lurking everywhere. That is not, of course, to say that Rouhani is a Zionist, pro-Israel, or that he even believes Israel has a "right to exist" (whatever that means). He also seems to be a firm supporter of Iran's authoritarian clerical regime (of course, if he indicated anything to the contrary, he wouldn't have been allowed to run). What is important to us, however, is that his actions consistently show that he believes Iran should end its pariah status, change its rogue path, and take its place as a major regional player.

What is particularly important as well is who his domestic enemies are. It is clear there is a major power struggle going on within Iran. Rouhani's enemies are those who support Iran's aggressive adventurism, pursuit of regional hegemony by violence and subversion, and who believe that the US and most of the rest of the world are determined to overthrow Iran's government by force. This is not an unreal fear, given today's political constellation, as well as the fact that the US and Britain did just that in the coup that overthrew Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, a memory that is very current for every Iranian.

It is by no means my purpose to extol President Rouhani. But it is clear that one camp wants Iran to go in a more peaceful direction, and one doesn't. It is in our interest (that of the US, Israel, and the rest of the world) to tilt towards the moderates. A larger historical perspective is essential here. Iran has been a major power for 2500 years. Sometimes it has been the regional hegemon, sometimes it has been weak and semi-occupied by foreigners, as in much of the first half of the 20th century. But it has never been powerless nor has it ever lost its national pride. Thus, one of the few certainties in the current Middle East turmoil is that Iran will remain a major player for the foreseeable future. It has oil, a highly educated population, and a strategic location.

Iran's invariable geopolitical enemies have been the Arabs to its west, an animosity exacerbated by Iran's adherence to Shia Islam since the 16th century. Iraq is Arab but predominantly Shia, although ruled by the Sunni minority until 2003. The rest of the Gulf Arab states are Sunni ruled,

many with significant, and usually oppressed, Shia minorities, which naturally seek help from Iran, which is happy to provide it. This is a normal dynamic in the Middle East, where a minority invariably seeks a foreign patron. It is unfortunate but does not make Iran an aggressive villain, any more than US support for Israel makes it one.

My point is that Iran has a recognized place in the Middle East, preceding by millennia any of the Arab states except Egypt. There is no inherent enmity between Iran and Israel or Iran and the US. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that Iran could coexist well with both, as it did under the Shah, or even under some version of Islamic rule (see under Saudi Arabia).

But what if this does not transpire? What if this rosy scenario does not come to pass? What if the nightmare scenario that Prime Minister Netanyahu envisions — that Iran will keep its promises — or as others imagine, that it won't, eventuates? What if a new (and smarter) Ahmadinejad takes power and is supported by a hawkish and anti-Semitic supreme leader?

Then, as the facts clearly show, Iran will be further from achieving a nuclear weapon that it has been for years. See the chart on Y-Net or Matt Duss and Mitch Plitnick's calm and reasoned analysis. But, as Republicans always point out in a domestic context, incentives work better than threats. This is doubly true in an international context, where threats almost inevitably backfire, especially against a strong, proud country like Iran.

What about Iran's threats to destroy Israel which (it is rarely pointed out) emanate from its most hawkish factions, not from Rouhani and his supporters? Didn't Hitler prove that we should never ignore threats to destroy the Jews? Isn't this like Munich in 1938?

This last-resort argument is ahistorical and, frankly, anti-Zionist. It ignores the fact that Israel now exists as a major conventional military power and an undoubted nuclear one as well. It also has the unwavering support of the world's superpower.

Those who pathologically hate and distrust President Obama are selectively and mendaciously distorting his positions. There is not the slightest doubt the US would come to Israel's aid if it were attacked. It would, appropriately, probably not aid Israel were it to launch an unprovoked attack of its own. There is no evidence that the Iranian leadership would risk the guaranteed destruction of its country in order to "erase" Israel. While a nuclear arms race in the Gulf would be a grave development, it would be preferable to a war, after which such a race would inevitably take place anyway.

There is no doubt that the world would be a safer place if Iran did not have a nuclear capacity. But that is in the realm of fantasy, not reality. There is absolutely no evidence that more pressure could extract any significant further concessions from Iran. On the contrary, it would get closer and closer to a weapon, if it wants one. And, as every fact-based commentary has shown, a strike

on Iran would only ensure that it would get a bomb as soon as possible, much quicker than it would under the proposed framework.

No, Virginia, there isn't a Santa Claus, and no, Bibi, there are no absolute guarantees in this deal nor in this life. For those who truly believe that the world is always out to get the Jews, there is little hope. But for those who prefer to recognize realities, this is a reasonable deal, much preferable to any of the fanciful alternatives.

**Note:** This commentary was originally published in *Partners for Progressive Peace* and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://progressiveisrael.org/the-iran-deal-and-its-disingenuous-debate/>

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