

The Iran Agreement: The Opposition Aspires to Impossibility, Irrelevancy and Irrationality

William O. Beeman, University of Minnesota

It is a foregone conclusion that those U.S. legislators now opposed will not be moved to vote in support of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement between the P5+1 nations and Iran dealing with Iran's nuclear program. Sadly, these legislators threaten to convince a number of others to vote with them to oppose the agreement. The course of action on this issue now is quite clear:

1. All of the legislators currently opposed to the JCPOA, along with a certain number of others—primarily those legislators in Red States facing re-election—will vote to reject the JCPOA. As a result, the opposition will succeed in rejecting the JCPOA.
2. President Obama will veto the resolution rejecting the JCPOA.
3. The opposition will try to override the veto. They hope they can recruit enough votes for the override. This requires a 2/3 vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

But what is the actual position on those who reject the JCPOA beyond opposition to the agreement? Some simply reject the agreement; some even rejected it before the text had been released to the public. Others have announced that they will reject it, but have no alternative. When pressed, however, a few members of Congress have said that they are rejecting it because they believe that the United States can forge a "better deal" with Iran.

This position is magical thinking. It assumes that there is an actual mechanism for renegotiation, and that a whole raft of negotiating points may still be open to force Iran into additional concessions. In fact, however, these additional concessions desired by the opposition (which includes Senator Chuck Schumer, a member of the President's own political party) are impossible, irrelevant or utterly irrational.

Impossible concessions

One concession these legislators think they can achieve is to force Iran to completely dismantle its nuclear development program. This is a complete impossibility. Iran is a signatory to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) along with the United States and 188 other world nations. The NPT grants all non-nuclear-weapons signatories the "inalienable right" to peaceful development of nuclear technology. It also requires nuclear weapons signatories like the United States to protect those rights for other nations. Iran will not give up its forty-year, multi-billion dollar nuclear technology program—a program that was originally instigated by the United States. Nor can it be forced to do this.

Others think that they can force Iran to have "no-warning" inspections of any and all sites in Iran of which anyone is suspicious—including military bases, research laboratories and college offices. They have fixated on the idea that it could take 24 days for inspections under the JCPOA to take place.

In fact the 24 day period is established in treaty law, and is only an upper limit. The JCPOA calls on Iran to accept the Additional Protocol to the NPT. This Protocol, now in force for over 100 world nations, allows inspectors to request access to suspected sites. The Iranian government must grant this access within a short period. If there is a dispute, the request goes into "arbitration." The 24 day period is the maximum time that could be expended before access is granted. In practice the time would be much shorter. Moreover, this only covers sites that contain no nuclear material. Any site with nuclear material is *already* under 24/7 inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a part of the original NPT. No nation on earth would agree to allow inspectors to "raid" any facility they wished with no notice. It would be a ceding of national sovereignty.

Members of the U.S. Congress opposed to the agreement also believe that somehow they can get the other P5+1 nations, The United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China as well as Iran to return to the negotiation table to forge a new agreement. After two years of hard negotiation the other P5+1 nations are satisfied with the agreement. They see no reason to return to negotiations or to sustain the economic sanctions against Iran. Getting them to agree to meet again is utter wishful thinking. Germany and France have already sent trade missions to Iran. So have Italy and Japan. Switzerland has removed all economic sanctions. The United Nations Security Council will soon lift the United Nations Sanctions. U.S. legislators thinking that they will start these negotiations and get the other nations to maintain economic sanctions is pure fantasy.

They also believe that they can prevent Iran from receiving its own sequestered money. This money was embargoed for the duration of the sanctions. When the sanctions are lifted, Iran gets access to its own funds once more. This is written into the sanctions agreement. It cannot be undone.

Irrelevant demands

Some members of Congress believe they can negotiate in “Christmas Tree” fashion—just as they do by adding irrelevant legislation in with their own appropriations bills—in renewed negotiations with Iran. Suggestions such as requiring Iran to release political prisoners, to improve its human rights record, to cease support for Syria, to stop funding Hezbollah and Hamas and to recognize the State of Israel are common demands.

None of these demands are in any way relevant to the JCPOA, which deals exclusively with Iran’s nuclear program. The P5+1 nations negotiated this, and while some of these side issues were mentioned in the course of negotiations, they could not be part of the treaty, because they had nothing to do with Iran’s nuclear development.

Moreover, America’s P5+1 allies view this thinking on the part of U.S. legislators to be completely insane. If the Agreement is rejected (given that the United States instigated the talks) the United States will sustain a severe blow in power, leadership and prestige. It will take a long time for other nations in the industrialized world to trust America again.

Irrational issues

Legislators opposed to the agreement regularly bring up issues such as Iran’s existential threat to Israel, the possibility that Iran could launch an atomic attack on the United States, and Iran’s “hegemony” in the Middle East region as reasons for not supporting the JCPOA.

The threat to Israel is particularly irrational. Thirty-nine former Israeli military and intelligence officials signed a letter of support for the JCPOA. Israel, with 200+ undeclared nuclear weapons to Iranian’s zero number of nuclear weapons is under no threat from Iran. As for the other opponents of the JCPOA, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, they already spend many times as much on weaponry as is in Iran’s defense budget.

The idea that the JCPOA must be rejected because of what Iran might do in the future despite any evidence, represents fantastical thinking that, once more, has no relevance to the actual Iranian nuclear program. Besides, they are based utterly on fear-mongering and fantasy scenarios that have no possibility of occurring. Even if they were remotely possible, rejecting the JCPOA would not be the way to stop them. The JCPOA curtails Iran’s possible nuclear weapons development for 10-15 years, and in some of its provisions, forever. To reject the JCPOA is to allow Iranian activities to go forward as they have in the past. If one believes in these doomsday scenarios, then rejecting the JCPOA would hasten, not curtail their realization.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there is no evidence anywhere that Iran had, has or will have a nuclear weapons program, making these irrational fears even more fantastic.

What can Thoughtful Citizens Do?

It is hopeless for citizens to convince any member of Congress who has publicly declared himself or herself opposed to the JCPOA to vote in support of it. They will all vote against it no matter what they think on a personal level.

Working with as yet uncommitted legislators is the only way to assure that the JCPOA will go into effect. Enough Congressional representatives must be convinced to support the Agreement in order to sustain a Presidential veto of legislation rejecting the agreement. This means that 34 Senators and 146 Representatives must vote to approve the JCPOA.

Thoughtful Citizens who support the Agreement must write, call and insist that their representatives vote in support. They must write newspapers and other media outlets to indicate their support. Although support of the JCPOA has become a partisan issue, it is essential that it be upheld, not for partisan reasons, but for America’s security, prestige and influence in the world.

William Beeman, professor and chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Minnesota, is an internationally known expert on the Middle East and the Islamic World, particularly Iran, the Gulf Region and Central Asia. He has lived and conducted research in Iran for more than 40 years. He is the author of “The Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other (University of Chicago Press, 2008)