

Iran is a process. Pay attention, Canada

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The interim Iranian nuclear deal is just that: interim. It is not the final word on the Iranian nuclear problem; it buys time for a permanent solution to be negotiated.

Iran has agreed to temporarily constrain its nuclear program in various ways and to accept more stringent international verification, but it has not accepted any irreversible limitations. The United States and its partners have agreed to limited and temporary sanctions relief, but the core of the sanctions regime, restrictions on oil sales and on the ability of Iran's banks to interact with the international financial system, remains firmly in place.

If a final deal is to be achieved much more will be required, and the two sides are far apart.

For example, while the U.S. is reluctant to accept the idea that Iran has a "right" to enrich uranium (Iran says it does), it seems to have conceded in practice that Iran will enrich on a small scale. Iran has developed an industrial scale enrichment program (far beyond the needs of its present and future civilian nuclear program) and wants to continue. So how many centrifuges will Iran keep under a permanent agreement? Of what type – its initial and primitive IR-1, or its newer and more sophisticated IR-2? Will it have the right to develop even better centrifuges? To what level of purity will these centrifuges be enriching? What verification regime will inspect all of this?

Another problem concerns the heavy water plant Iran is building at Arak. A byproduct of a heavy water plant is plutonium, different from enriched uranium and, potentially, a second route for Iran to achieve a bomb. The international community wants this shut down, or converted to a light water reactor, which is less dangerous from a proliferation standpoint. Iran insists it will continue with Arak, although work is suspended temporarily under the interim deal.

Because of these difficulties, and others, some fear that a permanent deal will never be achieved and we will enter a process of extending and modifying the interim deal, never quite getting a final agreement permanently limiting Iran's nuclear program. Tehran will not fully shut the door, but the time it would take for the Iranians to "break out" and build a weapon will gradually be extended, and their nuclear activities will be under greater scrutiny so their ability to do so secretly will be constrained. Meanwhile, they will gradually receive expanded relief from sanctions.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu castigates the interim deal as a historic mistake, but he offers only a patently non-negotiable alternative. In calling for the complete dismantling of all nuclear activity in Iran, Mr. Netanyahu is advancing a non-starter that is meant to be rejected and to encourage a conflict. His position, which is far from universally accepted in Israel, is really aimed at setting the stage for a campaign of regime change in Iran. However, the American people are not interested, it seems, after their costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So we may be entering another Middle Eastern diplomatic process that will lurch along toward a final deal but never quite get there. In this sense, perhaps we should think of this as the beginning of a new phase of the Iranian nuclear issue – the beginning of a process that will manage the issue over time by gradually reducing Iran’s nuclear capacity but not entirely eliminating it, while opening it up to ever greater inspections, in return for gradual but guarded steps to reintegrate Iran into the world economy.

This is different from the way we have been encouraged to think of this crisis: as something that will have a definite end point, either a conflict or an agreement to wrap up the nuclear program. But such clarity is historically unusual for these situations.

If this scenario plays out, opponents will howl. Certainly it will be frustrating, but it is better than war. On the eve of his disastrous invasion of Iraq, U.S. president George W. Bush was implored to leave the situation as it was – Saddam Hussein was in a box and his weapons of mass destruction program was severely constrained. (Indeed, we found out later that they had been so effectively constrained that he had abandoned them, politically rigged U.S. intelligence claims to the contrary.) It was costing something to leave the sanctions regime in place and to enforce it, but a fraction of what it subsequently cost in lives and treasure to remove Mr. Hussein.

As a final observation to all this, it seems that arms control and creative diplomacy are back. From the mechanisms being used to dismantle Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons in Syria to the process that will kick in to monitor the Iranian interim deal, this is arms control of the sort long derided by neo-conservatives and thought by many to be obsolete with the end of the Cold War.

Canada was once a world leader in this field, especially in verification, although we have since let go of that expertise. We have also renounced any pretense of playing a quiet facilitative role in helping the process to move forward, something we used to do to considerable effect in a variety of regions, including the Middle East. Canada thus stands utterly on the sidelines, earnestly lecturing everyone to no effect.

Peter Jones is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa.