

# A nuclear deal with Iran: “A farewell to arms control?”

*Netanyahu thinks the deal would pave Iran’s path to the bomb. But negotiations are the only way to avoid nuclear trip wires*

**Paul Meyer** | March 5, 2015

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu certainly pulled out all the rhetorical stops in his unprecedented speech on March 3 to a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

He worked in themes as diverse as Biblical references and the basics of uranium enrichment technology. He also artfully re-phrased the title of a celebrated Hemingway novel to suggest that a deal with Iran would not represent “a farewell to arms” but rather “a farewell to arms control.” This elicited warm applause from the mainly Republican members, although as a group they are not exactly noted for their embrace of arms control in international affairs.

In Netanyahu’s view, the deal being discussed by Iran with the U.S. and other members of the so-called P5+1 (Germany) group of states “doesn’t block Iran’s path to the bomb; it paves Iran’s path to the bomb” and thus should be rejected. However, as many, including President Obama, have observed, the Israeli Prime Minister didn’t offer up an alternative to the diplomatic option, beyond urging tighter sanctions on Iran as a means of eventually wringing more concessions from it.

Putting aside the domestic political factors that rendered the Israeli prime minister’s speech so controversial in both the U.S. and Israel, the core of the difference between his views and those of the Obama administration lies in differing assessments of the potential for a diplomatic solution to the outstanding concerns surrounding Iran’s nuclear program. The U.S. and other members of the P5+1 believe that the only feasible route to settling differences with Iran over its nuclear program is through a negotiated deal. This reflects the recognition that Iran (as is true for any state with a moderately sophisticated scientific and engineering capacity) is able to develop the capacity for enriching or reprocessing uranium (the so-called sensitive nuclear cycle) necessary for manufacturing nuclear weapons if it is intent to do so.

No one knows with any certainty whether the current Iranian regime harbours nuclear weapon development ambitions. A 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate concluded that any such activity ceased over a decade ago, but capabilities for such a program remain in place. Accordingly, the emphasis in the negotiations with Iran have focused on ways of constraining the development of its capacity for the full nuclear cycle through limits on the quantity and degree of enrichment to be permitted. The negotiators will also want to ensure that the totality of the Iranian nuclear program and the details of any eventual deal are adequately monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

For its part Iran is strongly motivated to reach an agreement given the negative impact of sanctions on its troubled economy. At the same time, the regime of President Rouhani is likely to resist constraints on its nuclear activity that exceed those required of any other non-nuclear weapon state party to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Proponents of a deal are naturally hampered in defending this option by the confidentiality that is a necessary condition of serious negotiation. Any effort to reveal key elements of a deal for public consumption is likely to complicate, rather than facilitate a resolution. Take for example President Obama's recent reference in a [media interview](#) to seeking a "double-digit" year "freeze" of Iran's nuclear program. This immediately prompted a rebuttal from Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Montreux, Switzerland, where he is meeting with Secretary of State Kerry, terming such a limit "unacceptable" and one that reflected "excessive and illogical demands."

The negotiators will be challenged to hammer out an accord that will be acceptable to both parties and the clock is ticking. A March 24 deadline has been set for a framework agreement to be concluded with June as the time limit for a final settlement. Given that the negotiations have already had to be extended twice since an interim deal was struck in 2013, it would be damaging to the whole enterprise if the negotiators were again to fail to conclude something substantive this month.

If and when a nuclear deal emerges, it will be subject to intense public and political scrutiny. Presumably it will take the form of an international legal instrument signed by all the negotiating partners that for the U.S. is likely to require Congressional review and possibly Senate ratification. Given attitudes in the Republican-controlled Congress, this could prove to be a major impediment to any negotiated agreement. President Obama has urged all concerned to withhold judgment until a deal is on the table and its provisions can be properly evaluated.

Whatever the reaction in the United States, an agreement on a deal this month would provide a positive input into the major NPT Review Conference due to convene in New York this April/May. Given the problems the meeting will face as a result of the failure to convene a conference on a WMD-free zone for the Middle East that was promised as part of the outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, any step to reduce nuclear tensions in the region would be welcome.

The unmentioned backdrop to the nuclear dispute between Israel and Iran is the contrast in their respective status under the NPT. Israel is one of only four states not party to the NPT and is widely believed to have an arsenal of nuclear weapons. Iran is a non-nuclear weapon state party to the NPT and Tehran claims that its nuclear program is civilian in nature and in keeping with its treaty obligations.

No deal with Iran that might emerge from the current negotiations is going to be able to address this asymmetry, but it could provide an impetus to a broader effort over time to prevent the region becoming, in the words of the Israeli Prime Minister, "criss-crossed by nuclear trip wires." This will require an active diplomacy focused on resolving political differences as much as constraining nuclear technical capacity.

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