



**Pugwash Workshop on
The Iranian Nuclear Standoff:
Concerns, Options, and Opportunities**

**Tel Aviv, Israel
4-5 April 2014**

REPORT

Main Points:

- The new outreach agenda under Rouhani and Zarif provides a limited window of opportunity for progress in Iran-Western relations, and has had a positive impact on the negotiations regarding the Iran nuclear issue.
- The Joint Plan of Action provides a good foundation, and participants noted that Iran has taken some concrete steps to meet its obligations under the JPA.
- Some participants highlighted the positive aspects of the proposed deal, in particular the intrusive inspection regime that would be put into place and the limits on Iranian enrichment capabilities.
- However, many participants felt that there is a lot of work to be done in negotiations to turn this into a solid final deal. A future comprehensive deal is likely to disappoint both sides' maximal expectations. Many Israelis remain deeply sceptical on a range of issues under consideration. They point out that while verification is important, it is not fool proof and they believe that some sort of US pledge to back up a deal with a military attack in the event of a possible future Iranian breakout might be needed.
- Other regional and international factors (Syria, Ukraine, etc), while serious issues in and of themselves, are not likely to detract from a possible agreement regarding the Iran nuclear issue.

Report

On 4-5 April 2014 Pugwash convened a workshop in Tel Aviv to discuss *The Iranian Nuclear Standoff: Concerns, Options, and Opportunities*. Organized in cooperation with Tel Aviv University's Center for Iranian Studies and Israeli Pugwash, this was the 11th such meeting in Israel, engaging approximately 25 current and former policy makers and experts in dialogue. This report is a summary of the topics discussed, prepared by the rapporteur,¹ who has sole responsibility for its contents. Pugwash would like to thank the supporters that make this and related meetings possible. In particular, we would like to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Tel Aviv for their support of this workshop.

Iran: Domestic change since Rouhani took office

Participants addressed the issue of what has happened in terms of change in the domestic political structures since Hassan Rouhani was elected as President of the Islamic Republic in June 2013. Key to this was identifying if there are differences in terms of policy and what the implications may be for Iran's regional and international outlook. Furthermore, participants discussed whether these changes should be understood as strategic or tactical.

Rouhani's election was greeted with some cautious optimism by the group. On the one hand, his victory "emasculated" the hardliners in the domestic situation and allowed for greater accommodation with the West. On the other hand, there was a sense that his election was part of a strategy to ensure greater legitimacy for the regime, as "the priority is survival of the regime." Participants agreed that there is still a "high degree of factionalism" in Iranian domestic politics within the various institutions, including the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps. One participant noted that, although under Rouhani the approach may seem different, domestically it is important to appreciate which institutions are changing and moreover how much influence these

¹ The rapporteur for this report was Poul-Erik Christiansen, Projects Assistant, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. Please note that the views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meeting, and they do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteur, nor of the Pugwash Conferences as an organization; however, a large majority of the participants was from Israel, and this is reflected in the views contained in this report. The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged.

institutions wield. As such, one participant suggested that the Supreme Leader is applying a “control and containment strategy” to Rouhani’s presidency: it is Khamenei who sanctioned broader support among conservatives for the outreach approach but this is a temporary move. Ultimately, he dictates the red lines in negotiations with the West and rapprochement with the US is still viewed as a danger. Furthermore, it was noted by another participant that by beginning the bilateral dialogue in the months before Rouhani was elected, Khamenei was ensuring that a wider audience understood this policy to be on his terms.

Many participants noted that most of the external policies of Iran reflect the internal political divides; on every issue of foreign policy there is the battle of internal politics, where progressives seek one course of action and radicals another. Overall, there was a strong sense that the power struggle between rival factions is not settled. One participant noted that this was very similar to the US domestic scene, in which the ‘engage’ camp is currently prevailing over the ‘rejectionist’ camp with respect to Iran. Another participant proposed that if one imagines the Iranian political environment as “a pendulum” between the conservatives and progressives, under Rouhani and Zarif’s stewardship this pendulum has swung to a more moderate approach. The “reception by Western countries will determine if the pendulum is able to stay”, and this is quite obviously affected by progress in the nuclear talks. If little comes from the engagement with the West, those factions which have swung toward Rouhani’s tent may choose to switch allegiance, particularly in the run up to future elections.

One participant noted that the Supreme Council has undergone an alteration in its composition, with roughly half of the Council changing, and this has seemingly allowed for a greater diversity of opinion. Furthermore, this participant believed that while progressives have not been advocating a wholesale shift in national and international policy there has been a rather more subtle “two-part shift” of direction. Firstly, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has sought to replace the “antagonistic” approach under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with a “win-win” strategy that explicitly identifies Western countries as partners. Secondly, Ali Shamkhani, the representative of the Supreme Leader in the Supreme Council, has promoted a narrative that “addresses internal threat perceptions in order to deal with outside threat perceptions”, recognising the need for Iran’s responsibility toward regional peace and stability. Both Zarif and Shamkhani had

previously tried to pursue a similar strategy in the late 1990s under the Presidency of Khatami but “had the rug pulled out from under them” by domestic conservatives and the Bush Administration’s recalcitrance.

Many participants noted the seriousness of the Iranian domestic situation, in terms of the economy, poverty, water resources, pollution, and oil and gas production. These factors will also weigh heavily on the minds of politicians but also on the population itself. There was a sense from participants that social conditions in Iran could also be determinative of some change, although such space is extremely limited by the Supreme Leader. While one participant suggested that the people have been able to cause change without bloodshed through the selection of “the least offensive candidate” in both the 1997 and 2013 elections, others were of the opinion that such change is demonstrative of Khamenei’s control and his fear over the course of the Islamic Revolution. According to this view, the selection of a more moderate President is better understood as shoring up the Revolution; many participants felt that regime preservation is the central driver of Iranian external policy and participants questioned the extent to which the Supreme Leader is able to change his outlook, in particular with respect to the US.

There was a feeling shared by many of the participants that there is a limited window of opportunity for progress in relations with Iran, and while Rouhani and Zarif are currently “empowered” to seek a form of international outreach the clock is ticking. This was seen by many to reflect a general trend in Iranian politics, that of pragmatism over ideology. Participants reflected on how such dynamics then play into the question of resolving the international confrontation on Iran’s nuclear program.

Iran: Prospects on the nuclear issue

Following the agreement of a Joint Plan of Action (JPA) between Iran and the P5+1 countries in November 2013, participants noted that progress has been made. However, one participant noted that it was “useful on principles” but more concrete measures are needed. There was concern among some participants that while the official narrative coming from the West is that the JPA has rolled back the Iranian nuclear program, in the meantime, Iran has also “rolled forward” a number of issues. One participant was worried that that “the sides used fuzzy language to bridge

over the differences of opinion” on advanced centrifuge R&D. Iran has accordingly been able to continue its work on advanced centrifuge design which would allow them to enrich faster in the future – many participants underscored that this has the implication of rendering irrelevant the 20% enrichment level which has so long been a concern of the P5+1 States.

Of central concern to many participants was the absence of reference to possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program in the JPA. It was considered of critical importance that this issue be addressed in a future comprehensive deal or “it will not be a comprehensive deal.” One participant felt that Iran wants to have the discussion it is currently having because “haggling over details prevents discussion of its past behaviour.” However, a number of participants pointed to the dangers of trying to humiliate Iran on its past behaviour insofar as it would be counterproductive and possibly produce intransigence on the Iranian side.

One participant stated that Iran will almost certainly “adhere to the letter of the agreement” from their side, although another participant felt that this is partly because Iran “thrives on ambiguity”: within the agreement it has enough of a grey area where it is hard for something to be pinpointed to say ‘you have not fulfilled this commitment’ or ‘you have violated this measure’. Furthermore, one participant noted that whether or not Iran makes a decision to lower or decrease its nuclear activities to a point that satisfies the West is potentially reversible, as the Supreme Leader “can change his mind tomorrow.”

There was concern expressed over the lack of a clear explanation for why Iran has invested so heavily in the type of nuclear program it is pursuing. As to whether weaponization was a realistic prospect, many participants noted the subtle distinction between having a capability and not – while Iran may have the capability for one implosion device now, if it were seriously pursuing an arsenal then this would be a different matter entailing many other studies and the development of a range of technologies. This issue is central to the concerns over breakout and the possible timelines. One participant noted that the public discourse on breakout is often unhelpful, relying on a set of assumptions that are casually arrived at, yet presented as objective. Some commented that the increased level of verification under discussion would be a positive step forward, and would make it difficult for Iran to proceed toward a full nuclear weapons program without

advance notice. One participant noted such a move would require them to throw out inspectors, which would be an “unambiguous statement of intent and the world will respond.” While it is possible Iran might proceed at undisclosed sites, at best this might result in one or two nuclear weapons, but not a full nuclear weapons program. Some believe that if Iran were to weaponize, they would be likely to expel the inspectors and proceed toward a full nuclear program. Others say this view completely misses the political impact if Iran were to acquire even one nuclear weapon.

One participant observed that since the early Clinton years enrichment prevention has been the goal of the US and the other Western countries but the facts have changed and now there is a need to prevent weaponization as a minimum objective. So the critical question becomes, “how can we increase our capabilities to guard against a covert program?” The central thrust of the future comprehensive deal must therefore be to get an agreement that will regulate detection and verification. It was pointed out by a number of participants that while verification is essential, it is not foolproof – “verification can only work if the places are accessible to inspectors.” In terms of possible breakout, timely detection and timely reaction must be defined very clearly and agreement must ensure this is feasible or it will not be acceptable to the world.

There was debate among participants as to whether the sanctions regime had proved effective in securing the interim agreement. Several participants felt that the sanctions were instrumental in forcing Iran to the table and that the West must maintain this leverage for future negotiations. Others disagreed and felt it was more of a joint interest to avoid conflict; but it was pointed out by one participant that the Iranians are “destined to be disappointed on sanctions relief” because the prospect of the US lifting its sanctions is minimal, given the extent to which they are written in to law through Congress and tied to other domestic issues such as human rights. However, assuming the Iranian leadership understand this point, their engagement in negotiations is a possible sign of goodwill. The imposition of further sanctions depends on international harmony and there was discussion as to whether the recent incident in Crimea would negatively affect Russian willingness to join with the US. Many felt that the signs were that this would not be the case but it was noted that Iran has been able to exploit its “Eastern option” of Russia, China, and Japan in order to cope with the sanctions. However, one participant believed that this was not

their long-term priority and that the “plan A” was to improve relations with the US. There was discussion as to whether détente rather than rapprochement was the goal, a situation of transforming the relationship “from enemy to rival.”

With respect to the ongoing negotiations, some participants expressed some cautious optimism that a final deal will be able to be negotiated. One participant believed the negotiations will be useful for the Iranians to better understand what Washington can live with in terms of the nuclear program. There was a sense from many participants that both sides are going to have to face up to the fact that any deal will fall short of both sides’ expectations. For the Iranians, sanctions relief will be slow and the most important financial ones will not be the first on the table; also, the West seemingly wants a deep cut-back of their centrifuge program, which is contrary to stated Iranian policy. For the West, a near-term deal will have difficulty addressing future uncertainty regarding the possibility of a covert nuclear program.

Some Israelis raised questions as to whether or not the US was prepared to “back up” a possible nuclear deal by making clear it would launch a limited attack on Iran nuclear sites if Iran were to be found in violation of the agreement. It was notable that, while in prior meetings this point was raised as a possible Israeli option, it was not raised in this meeting.

Iran and the regional environment

Discussion then also focused on Iran’s role in the region, in particular on what role it may play in the Syrian conflict. One participant suggested that Iran’s position on and approach to Syria is similar to its position in international discussions on the 20% level of uranium enrichment: Iran uses it as a negotiating tool that they could sacrifice and be seen to make a significant concession. They have convinced the West that nothing can be done without Iranian involvement, and this is a strategic victory for them. However, another participant felt that the assumption should not be made that if Iran can be induced to behave differently the situation in Syria will improve: Iran in fact does not have so much influence. If there is a peace initiative Iran can help as an external power to maintain it and stabilise the situation. Someone said that it is an “inconvenient truth” that the US has not been able to solve regional problems without Iran. Many participants felt that Iran should certainly have been invited to the Geneva conferences and that

this represents a missed opportunity, although one participant suggested that Rouhani and Zarif “dodged a bullet” by not having to participate.

One participant felt that in this Syrian conflict “there are no good guys”, just “bad guys on both sides.” The situation has been exacerbated by external support for the various groups. Here, a number of participants believed that Assad has only been able to continue due to support from Iran and Russia. One participant suggested that Iran helped the Assad regime control the situation “through a transfer of knowledge and equipment”, based on its own experience in 2009, and that through Hezbollah the regime’s military was trained to adapt to a militia-style fighting.

There was a more general discussion on the implications of the conflict for exacerbating religious tensions in the Middle East and it was noted that there was “a heightened sense of sectarianism in the region.” One participant suggested that by exploiting religious tension, Assad actually acted against Iran’s interest. Another participant felt that Iran was less concerned with maintaining Assad’s regime and that it would “be happy to cut the head off to preserve the body.” Many participants felt that the Sunni-Shi’a divide has extremely grave implications for the region and “should not be underestimated”, although one participant suggested that since the Islamic Revolution people tend to look at the region “through the prism of religion”, whereas there are other stronger determinants of policy. This led to a discussion on the extent to which ideology drives Iran’s strategic calculus with respect to Syria; it was suggested that on financial investment alone Iran has a serious interest in maintaining the Assad regime and that this presents a more compelling logic than ideology.

It was felt by some participants that there is a serious Saudi vs. Iran component to the Syria conflict and that this plays into the regional ambitions of both countries. The fact that the Qods Force has lost a higher number of soldiers in Syria is “a positive outcome for the Saudis”, as it represents a drain on Iran. One participant suggested that the Supreme Leader is most responsible for “poisoning relations” with the Saudis, although another participant felt that there was interest on both sides for repairing lines of communication between the two countries.

Progress on Syrian chemical weapons issues was noted. The possibility was raised that a chemical-weapons-free zone might be a possible first step toward a regional WMD-Free Zone.

Conclusion

Participants agreed that these discussions under the Pugwash umbrella provide a useful opportunity to listen to the range of opinions within Israel and from international participants. While some progress has been made vis-à-vis the Iran nuclear issue, deep concerns still exist in Israel as to the nature of a final nuclear deal and its possible impact on Israeli security. The hope is that negotiators will address the full range of concerns about past, current, and future issues. It was noted that the political leadership in Iran has opened up possibilities that have not previously existed; however, many remain skeptical that the full Iranian establishment is firmly behind these negotiations. The coming months will be important on a range of inter-related issues. Pugwash will convene another of its meetings on these topics in Israel by the end of 2014. Participants expressed appreciation to the government of Norway and the Norwegian ambassador in Israel for hosting these meetings.

Participant List

Mr. Yossi Alpher (Israel), currently completing a book on Israel's periphery doctrine [former Mossad official, former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and former coeditor of bitterlemons.net]

Dr. Ephraim Asculai (Israel), Senior Fellow, The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv

Dr. Eitan Barak (Israel), Lecturer, The Department of International Relations, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Fellow, The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace

Prof. Amazia Baram (Israel), Professor Emeritus in the Department of Middle East History, and Director of the Center for Iraq Studies at the University of Haifa [formerly: Fellow at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, U.S. Institute of Peace, the Washington Institute, and the Brookings Institute]

Ms. Helit Barel (Israel), The Institute for Inclusive Security, PhD candidate, Department of Politics and Government, University of Maryland with research on nuclear deterrence and nuclear strategy with a focus on lessons for Israel and Iran [formerly: Director, Council for Peace and Security in Israel; Director, Israeli National Security Council (2000-2002)]

Mr. Thomas Rem Berdal (Norway), First Secretary, Royal Norwegian Embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel

Ms. Annemijn vanden Broek (Netherlands), Iran expert, Embassy of The Netherlands in Tel Aviv

Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom (Israel), Senior Research Associate, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv; [formerly: Deputy for Security Policy of the National Security Advisor (in the National Security Council); Director of Strategic Planning in the Planning Branch of the IDF GHQ]

Mrs. Sandra Ionno Butcher (USA/UK), Executive Director, Pugwash Conferences, and Member, Pugwash Council and Director of the Pugwash History Project; [formerly: Senior Programme Coordinator, Pugwash Conferences; Joint Executive Secretary, British Pugwash Group; Executive Director, Student Pugwash USA; Interim Research Director and Senior Analyst, British American Security Information Council]

Mr. Poul-Erik Christiansen (UK), Projects Assistant, Pugwash Conferences; Board Member of the International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP); PhD Candidate at the School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa

Prof. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino (Italy), Secretary-General, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs; Member, Pugwash Executive Committee; Professor of Mathematical Physics, University of Milan; [formerly: Secretary General, Union of Italian Scientists for Disarmament (USPID); Director, Program on Disarmament and International Security, Landau Network – Centro Volta, Como, Italy]

Mr. Matthew Duss (US), Senior Policy Analyst, Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C.

Ms. Taghreed El-Khodary (Palestine/Netherlands), Editor at Fanack.com (Chronicle of the Middle East & North Africa); Member, Pugwash Council; [formerly: New York Times, Voice of America, Al-Jazeera, and other media outlets]

Amb. Oded Eran (Israel), Senior Research Associate (and former Director, July 2008-November 2011) at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), and former Ambassador of Israel to the EU, DCM, Washington, and others

Professor Yair Evron (Israel), Professor Emeritus, and Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel-Aviv; [formerly: Professor, Head, Department of Political Science; Head, Graduate Program, Security Studies, Tel-Aviv University; Visiting Professor or Research Fellow, Harvard, Cornell, UCLA, Concordia, MIT, Georgetown and Oxford Universities]

Dr. Brandon Friedman (Israel), Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv

Ambassador Jeremy Issacharoff (Israel), Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem; [formerly: Deputy Chief of Mission - Israel Embassy in Washington DC and Member of UN Secretary General Advisory Board for Disarmament Affairs]

Mr. Meir Javedanfar (Israel), established and runs Middle East Analyst, a subsidiary of The Middle East Economic and Political Analysis Company ([meepas](http://meepas.com)), whose main goal is to analyze contemporary political and economic affairs of the region; teaches a “Contemporary Iranian Politics” course at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya; expert on the UN [Alliance of Civilisations](#) - Global Experts Resource Project; member and contributor to the [Gulf 2000](#)

[Middle East Project](#) which is run by the School of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University in New York City

Dr. Emily Landau (Israel), Director of Arms Control and Regional Security Project, Institute for National Security Studies [formerly: The Jaffee Center for Security Studies, Tel Aviv]

Mr. Daniel Levy (UK), Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, UK

Dr. Reza Marashi (US), Research Director, National Iranian American Council, Washington, DC; [formerly with Office of Iranian Affairs, US Department of State; former Analyst at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS)]

Prof. David Menashri (Israel), President of the College of Law and Business, Ramat Gan; Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University [formerly: Dean of Special Program and Director, Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, Parviz and Poursan Nazarian Chair for Modern Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University]

Mr. Jonathan Miller (US), International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP), MA student in Islamic law at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London

Dr. Steve Miller (US), Member of the Pugwash Council, Chair of the Pugwash Executive Committee; Director of the International Security Program of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Editor-in-chief of the quarterly International Security, and Co-chair of the US Pugwash Committee

Amb. Svein Sevje (Norway), Norwegian Ambassador to Israel [formerly: Ambassador to Sudan (2008-2010); Special Envoy for the Middle East (2006-2008), Ambassador to Syria and Lebanon (2002-2006), Head of the Middle East Section, MFA, Oslo (1998-2002); Minister-Counsellor in the Embassy in Tel Aviv/Head of the Representative Office to the Palestinian Authority (1994-98). Served in Brasilia, Madrid, New Delhi, Berlin (GDR)]

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