

The Iran Agreement: The Impossible, Irrelevant and Irrational Opposition

By William O. Beeman

Editor's Introduction: A tremendous amount of pressure was exerted and resources spent on trying to influence the U.S. Congress to oppose the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement between the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, the United States, plus Germany) and Iran dealing with Iran's nuclear program. According to National Public Radio, since mid-July, the lobbying group, J Street, had 125 meetings with lawmakers and planned ads for five states. But opposing the agreement, Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran, supported by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), spent tens of millions of dollars on lobbying and TV ads in 23 states. They had 400 meetings in congressional offices in the last week of July alone.(1)

However, by early September, those opposed to the JCPOA were unable to persuade enough members of Congress to reject the agreement, meaning that it is expected to go forward and the crippling economic sanctions that Iran has had to endure will be lifted. It is unfortunate that even Administration officials and legislators, who are in support of the agreement, have continued to assert the false premise that Iran has a nuclear weapons program and presents a danger if not tightly monitored—though that's as expected, because convincing people of this has been central to negotiating such an agreement in the first place.

It may come as no surprise then that those who reject the JCPOA have already drafted a Plan B, determined to continue their opposition. Ben Cardin, a U.S. senator from Maryland, is going to introduce the "Iran Policy Oversight Act of 2015," which changes the intent and requirements in the JCOPA in order to "strengthen" it, according to Jim Lobe, Washington bureau chief for Inter Press Service, who obtained a copy of the draft. Lobe describes it as having AIPAC's fingerprints all over it and being so hostile to Iran that it threatens to sink the agreement.(2)

William Beeman: It's worth examining, beyond their opposition, what the actual positions were of those in Congress who rejected the JCPOA. (This includes Senator Chuck Schumer, as well as Ben Cardin, both members of the President's own political party.) Some simply rejected the agreement; some even rejected it before the text had been released to the public. Others announced that they had no alternative other than rejection. When pressed, however, a few members of Congress have said that they rejected it because they believed that the United States could forge a "better deal" with Iran.

This position is magical thinking. It assumed that there is an actual mechanism for renegotiation, and that a whole raft of negotiating points could still be open to force Iran into additional concessions. In fact, however, these additional concessions desired by the opposition were impossible, irrelevant or utterly irrational.



Magic Tricks: "The greatest performers have always been able to make audience members not only suspend their disbelief but suspend their inquisitive nature to find out how it was done until after they have absorbed the entire performance because they're so caught up in the magic, so caught up in the mystery that they're not thinking how did you do that..."

—"Heroes of Magic," a TV-documentary from the UK featuring footage of famous magicians, aired in the year 2000

Impossible concessions

One concession these legislators claimed that they could achieve was 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 thought that they could 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 believed that somehow they could get the other P5+1 nations: the UK, 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.

These legislators also said that they could 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 believed that they could 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.



Magical Thinking: the irrational belief that one can bring about a circumstance or event by thinking about it or wishing for it.
—*Medical Dictionary for the Health Professions and Nursing, Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary 2012, accessed 2015*

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

Irrational issues

Legislators opposed to the agreement regularly brought 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 Iran'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 of rejecting the JCPOA 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. A rejection of the JCPOA would have allowed 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.

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Endnotes

1. "Lobbyists Spending Millions to Sway the Undecided on Iran Deal," Alisa Chang, August 6, 2015, National Public Radio
2. "AIPAC's Plan B?" Jim Lobe, September 3, 2015; "Poison Pills Plentiful in Cardin Bill," Jim Lobe, September 5, 2015, lobelog.com