

Responding to the Critics of the Interim Iranian Nuclear Agreement

**Mieke Eoyang**Vice President for the
National Security
Program [@MiekeEoyang](https://twitter.com/MiekeEoyang)**Faris Alikhan**

On November 24, Iran signed an interim agreement with the Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany (the P5+1) to suspend their nuclear program for a 6-month period. In the meantime, they will negotiate a comprehensive agreement that would meet the West's goal of definitively keeping nuclear weapons out of Iran's hands as a condition of lifting comprehensive sanctions currently in place against Iran.¹ The agreement is the first limit on Iran's nuclear program in a nearly a decade.²

The interim agreement has been the subject of much debate and criticism from both sides of the aisle. The underlying issues in the debate—nuclear weapons development and the impact of economic sanctions—are complex, and even well-informed readers may be misreading details of the debate. In this memo, Third Way provides general framing guidance for understanding and talking about the interim agreement, as well as addressing its major critiques.

Understanding the Deal

Framing . . .

This interim agreement is a **small but necessary first step** to comprehensively keep nuclear weapons out of Iran's hands.

- A deal with Iran is our best option. Without a deal, the world is left with only two bad options: (1) a military strike that could set off a broader war in the Middle East; or (2) a nuclear-armed Iran, which sets off a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world. Neither of these is in our security interests.
- Given the 30-year history of distrust between our two nations, an interim confidence building measure is necessary before we get a final deal.

- Is this the final deal that we want? No. Is the deal an improvement over a status quo where Iran continues to make progress toward a bomb? Absolutely. This interim agreement freezes Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons for six months while we negotiate a comprehensive agreement.

What Iran Gives . . .

Under this interim agreement Iran would have to **freeze, and in some areas rollback**, its progress toward a nuclear weapon in key areas.

- First, the deal suspends Iran's ability to enrich uranium, one of the most difficult and time-consuming aspects of nuclear weapons development. ³
- The interim agreement would require Iran to turn its stock of near 20% enriched uranium, which is closest to weapons grade, into a form unusable for further enrichment, or use it in a reactor already under international safeguard. ⁴
- The interim agreement also requires Iran to suspend further uranium enrichment under 5%, which is used to power reactors for civilian nuclear energy, in addition to rendering unusable the majority of the centrifuges it would use to enrich uranium.
- Second, the deal suspends Iran's second path to a bomb by preventing the heavy-water reactor at Arak from becoming operational over the period of the agreement. ⁵ This would prevent Iran from separating plutonium, which could also be used for a nuclear weapon like the one the U.S. used in Nagasaki.
- Finally, because the U.S. fears Iran may cheat on the agreement, Iran must submit to intrusive, daily inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) throughout the six-month period. ⁶

Beyond just freezing the program, the cumulative effect of the interim deal would increase the amount of time it would take Iran to make a run for the bomb, known as the “dash time,” from several weeks to approximately two months. Such an extension of the dash time would allow the U.S. sufficient preparation for an effective military strike, if necessary.

What Iran Gets . . .

In exchange for this freeze, Iran would get very limited, targeted, and reversible sanctions relief.

- Iran would receive about \$7 billion in value through the sanctions relief, which is equivalent to less than 3 days worth of economic activity, or less than 10% of the total economic harm imposed by the sanctions thus far.⁷
- The sanctions regime would remain in place.⁸ The current sanctions relief only opens a small sluice-gate which could be closed in the event of Iran’s non-compliance, and does little to relieve sanctions’ crippling effect on Iran’s economy.⁹
- This interim agreement does not require any Congressional action on sanctions in order to be implemented.¹⁰

Responding to the Critics

*This deal doesn’t end or dismantle Iran’s nuclear program.*¹¹

This first step agreement is a test to see if the Iranians are serious. Is this the final deal that we want? No. Is the deal an improvement over a status quo where Iran continues to make progress towards a bomb? Absolutely. But given the long history of distrust between Iran and the West, it was necessary to take a baby step before getting to a comprehensive agreement. Some critics will say, “if you can’t get everything, don’t give anything.” But while you wait for Iran to concede everything, they continue their progress towards to bomb.

Once Iran gets a taste of sanctions relief, it will be impossible to get to a final deal. We should impose new sanctions now. ¹²

The sanctions regime remains in place, stopping the flow of Iran's oil revenues. The interim agreement only gives Iran \$7 billion--less than three days of Iran's economic activity. It will not end the crippling effects on Iran's economy that have forced them to the table to deal.

International businesses know that this is just an interim agreement. They will not want to do business with Iran over the next six months if Iran isn't serious about a comprehensive deal.

If we do not get a deal over the next six months then we should absolutely consider imposing additional sanctions. Iran must know that their time is limited.

This interim agreement weakens international support for the military option.

First, if Iran cheats on this deal they're not just flouting the U.S. but also the other Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council, including Russia and China, who are also parties to this agreement. They also have an interest in ensuring Iran sticks to the deal.

Second, by trying to lengthen the "dash time", to months rather than weeks, the U.S. is creating enough space where they could mount an effective military operation. This means that the military option is most certainly on the table, at least for the U.S.

We can't trust the Iranian regime, which is dominated by the fundamentalist mullahs who took over the country in 1979.

This agreement does not rely on trust, but on verification. It would force Iran to submit to intrusive, daily inspections by the IAEA, which has long harbored doubts about Iran's program. If Iran cheats on the deal, or doesn't make a comprehensive agreement within the next six months, we can take punitive action then. But broadly speaking, in order to achieve U.S. goals in this complicated world, we cannot

make agreements only with our friends. As Yitzhak Rabin said, “You make peace with your enemies, not the Queen of Holland.”

This interim agreement does not address Iran’s regional mischief, support for terrorism, repression of its own people, or anti-democratic behavior.

The interim agreement is not intended to solve every problem we have with Iran. It is merely a first step towards keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of Iran, which would make all those other problems worse. An Iran with a nuclear shield would allow it to pursue its regional mischief with less fear of reprisal.

Even after we reach a comprehensive agreement, all of the other efforts that we have to hold Iran accountable for its bad behavior will remain in place – including keeping Tehran on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, continuing sanctions on Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) entities and individuals, and calling it to task for its human rights abuses in front of the international community.¹³

Conclusion

This deal is a small, but necessary, first step towards a comprehensive nuclear agreement that would keep weapons out of Iran’s hands. Without a deal, the world is left with only two bad options: (1) a military strike that could set off a broader war in the Middle East; or (2) a nuclear-armed Iran, which might instigate a nuclear arms race in the most volatile region in the world. Neither of these outcomes are in our security interests. With this deal, the Administration is treading a delicate path to ensure American security and global stability.

END NOTES

1. "Iran Nuclear Deal: Full Text" CNN.com, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013/ Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/24/world/meast/iran-deal-text/>; See also United States, The Executive Office of the President, Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: First Step Understandings Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program", November 23, 2014. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/23/fact-sheet-first-step-understandings-regarding-islamic-republic-iran-s-n>; See also United States, The Executive Office of the President, Office of the Press Secretary "Statement By the President On First Step Agreement On Iran's Nuclear Program", November 23, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.
2. "Country Profile: Iran," Nuclear Threat Initiative, November 2013. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/iran/nuclear/>.
3. Rob Wile, "In One Chart, Here's the Most Important Part of the Iran Deal," *Business Insider*, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-important-part-of-iran-deal-2013-11>.
4. Rob Wile, "In One Chart, Here's the Most Important Part of the Iran Deal," *Business Insider*, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-important-part-of-iran-deal-2013-11>; See also "Nuclear Iran: Nuclear Sites: Facilities," Institute for International Security. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/sites/facilities/tehran-research-reactor-trr/>.
5. "Nuclear Sites: Arak," Institute for Science and International Security. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at: <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/sites/detail/arak/>.

- 6.** Fredrik Dahl, "Factbox: Heightened, vital role for U.N. Inspectors" *The Chicago Tribune*, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-iran-nuclear-inspectors-20131124,0,1113180,full.story>.
- 7.** Matthew Philips, "How Much More Oil Does Iran Get to Sell?" *Bloomberg Businessweek*, November 25, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-11-25/how-much-more-oil-does-iran-get-to-sell>; See also "Iran: Overview," The World Bank. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview>.
- 8.** Catlin MacNeal, "Kerry: Basic Architecture of Sanctions Will Remain In Place," Talking Points Memo, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/kerry-we-have-no-illusions-about-iran-deal>; See also Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010, P.L. 111-195, July 1, 2010. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ195/content-detail.html>; See also United States, Department of State, Bureau of Economic, Energy, and Business Affairs, "Fact Sheet: Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (CISADA)" May 23, 2011. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/esc/iransanctions/docs/160710.htm>; See also "Iran Matters: Best Analysis and Facts on the Iranian Nuclear Challenge from Harvard's Belfer Center," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://iranmatters.belfercenter.org/sanctions>.
- 9.** John W. Schoen, "Nuke deal sanctions relief will do little for Iran," CNBC, November 25, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101226113>.

- 10.** For more on sanctions, see Elizabeth Rosenberg and Colin Kahl “The Great Unwinding: Iranian Nuclear Negotiations and Principles for Sanctions Relief,” Policy Brief, Center for New American Security, October 11, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at:
<http://www.cnas.org/publications/great-unwinding-iranian-nuclear-negotiations-and-principles-sanctions-relief#>.
- 11.** Michele Chabin, “Israel Calls Iran Deal a Historic Mistake,” *USA Today*, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at:
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/11/24/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-reactions/3690161/>.
- 12.** Siobhan Hughes , “Lawmakers Continue Push for New Sanctions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2013. Accessed November 27, 2013. Available at:
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304011304579217982936855504>.
- 13.** Nick Cumming-Bruce, “U.N. Rights Council Backs Investigator on Iran,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2011. Accessed November 26, 2013. Available at:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/world/asia/25iht-iran25.html>.