After the popular overthrow of the U.S.-backed Shah in 1979, the United States and Iran formed one of the most hostile relationships of any two countries not at war in the modern era. The roots of their tensions derive from a complex set of issues having in part to do with history, conflicting ideologies, and regional as well as global geopolitics. The outcome has been decades of minimal dialogue coupled with a regular exchange of insults and accusations, warping not only their respective public opinions and politics, but also the geostrategic landscape from the Levant to the Persian Gulf and beyond. However, while the U.S.–Iran rivalry has not served to ease regional fires and the spread of instability, cooperation between them may do so, given America’s position as a major global power and Iran’s as a major regional power. The greatest evidence for the possibility of such a change in the U.S.–Iran relationship occurred from 2013–2016, when both sides pursued diplomatic engagement to resolve the Iranian nuclear dispute.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama’s second term marked a major break from the long-established U.S.–Iran status quo of constant elevated tensions. For the first time, both governments opted for a serious engagement policy to resolve a major point of contention: the nature of the Iranian nuclear program. The key to nuclear engagement’s success was its decisive split from the overt hostility that had long defined the bilateral relationship. Specifically, nuclear engagement was signified by the following:

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• Regular high-level bilateral dialogue, including between Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, as well as between numerous other senior officials;

• Mutual acknowledgement of legitimate interests on the nuclear issue at the outset of the negotiations: America’s being that Iran not build nuclear weapons and Iran’s being that its right to peaceful nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment, be respected;

• Mutual respect, with negotiators on both sides forgoing hostile rhetoric and seeking to understand each other’s concerns;

• A cessation of threats, escalatory actions, and pressure tactics, exemplified by actions such as the Obama White House’s steadfast opposition to the application of new sanctions and Congressional attempts at scuttling the negotiations.

Achieving such a drastic shift in the U.S.–Iran relationship also vitally required an alignment of leaders, on each side, ready to invest the necessary political capital for diplomacy to succeed. In 2013, this became the case with President Obama in his second term and the election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who succeeded the bellicose Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after a campaign stressing pragmatism in domestic and external affairs. Until Obama and Rouhani, the history of U.S.–Iran engagement had been one of missed opportunities, with neither side ever ready at the same time—for example, reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami made overtures to President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, only to be rebuffed with the “axis of evil” designation.

Among the challenges that the Obama and Rouhani administrations had to overcome were powerful domestic forces vehemently opposed to U.S.–Iran dialogue. Decades of hostility-reinforcing actions had naturally entrenched interests on both sides that thrived on confrontation and maintaining a vicious cycle of U.S.–Iran escalation. As high-level nuclear talks began making progress in 2013, many in Tehran worried that hardline pro-Israel, Saudi, and neoconservative lobbies and constituencies in the United States would succeed in undercutting diplomacy. Likewise, the Obama White House was cognizant that elements in American and Iranian politics wished to see nuclear engagement fail. “Just because Iranian hardliners chant ‘Death to America’ does not mean that that’s what all Iranians
believe,” Obama declared in August 2015. “In fact, it’s those hardliners who are most comfortable with the status quo ... They’re making common cause with the Republican caucus.”

Simply stated, actual U.S.–Iran engagement on the nuclear issue was an exercise in diplomacy devoid of threats or talk of “sticks.” From 2013–2016, engagement resulted in the landmark nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA)—which marked the highest standards on nuclear transparency and non-proliferation ever negotiated—and also affected the broader U.S.–Iran relationship and regional geopolitics. At the same time, nuclear engagement was met with serious setbacks and challenges, both from opposition forces and from more structural issues related to easing U.S.–Iran tensions after decades of hostility, particularly in relation to sanctions relief.

The biggest question raised at the time by President Obama’s and Rouhani’s piecemeal nuclear engagement was whether it would offer a stepping stone toward broader diplomatic engagement on other issues. For all intents and purposes, engagement was a crowning success in terms of achieving each side’s stated interests on the nuclear issue. Iran, for its part, won recognition of its nuclear fuel cycle capabilities by the major world powers, a de facto security assurance against attack by the United States and/or its regional allies, and the removal of nuclear-related sanctions including multiple UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Meanwhile, Iran’s six negotiating partners (the five permanent UNSC members and Germany) gained verifiable guarantees that Iran was committed to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligation to not develop nuclear weapons.

However, with the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, nuclear engagement has thus far proved to be a ceiling for U.S.–Iran engagement, not the floor that some hoped (and others feared) it would be. For his part, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has spoken about his frustration toward his American counterparts for not recognizing the nuclear deal as a base for U.S.–Iran relations. Nevertheless, the experience of nuclear engagement provides valuable lessons for how the two longtime foes can successfully approach each other on other matters in the future, should they decide to do so, and both meet their core objectives.

The Roots of Obama’s Nuclear Engagement Policy

The 2008 U.S. presidential election spurred hope across the world that the decades-long hostile U.S.–Iran relationship was at a turning point. For the first time, a major American presidential candidate, Barack Obama, voiced support for a policy of engaging Iran, not encaging it. During his campaign, Obama stressed
his desire for “direct presidential diplomacy with Iran without preconditions.” After his victory, in March 2009, he delivered a special message on the occasion of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, which marked the first time an American president addressed the government of the “Islamic Republic of Iran.” In the message, Obama called for “engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect” and diplomacy that is “not advanced by threats.”

However, the reality of Obama’s first-term approach on Iran proved different from the vision of engagement given in his 2009 Nowruz address. Initially, in the spring of 2009, progress on the nuclear dispute seemed imminent as Obama and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei exchanged a series of letters. After his first letter was welcomed and reciprocated by Ayatollah Khamenei, Obama wrote another in which he suggested direct negotiations on the nuclear issue, something without precedent. The June 2009 Iranian presidential election followed, which temporarily dashed hopes for any direct diplomacy. However, not long after his contested reelection, Ahmadinejad communicated Iran’s readiness for Obama’s proposed bilateral nuclear talks. In October 2009, history was made when Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, sat down for over 45 minutes with then-U.S. Undersecretary of State William Burns, marking the highest level of U.S.–Iran dialogue since before the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The events following the Jalili–Burns discussion revealed that Obama—who entered office with a major financial crisis on his shoulders and a policy priority to reform the U.S. health-care system—was not prepared to invest the political capital necessary for engagement with Iran to be successful. The talk between Jalili and Burns focused on addressing a principle concern for each side: for Iran, that it would receive fuel to keep its Tehran medical and research reactor (TRR) operational, and for the United States, that Iran’s stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) be reduced. In Geneva, Jalili and Burns tentatively agreed to a “swap deal” that would have seen the majority of Iran’s LEU stockpile shipped to Russia to be further enriched to the 20-percent level necessary to produce TRR fuel. This 20-percent enriched uranium was then to be sent to France to be converted into fuel plates for the TRR. The plan would in effect have eliminated any need for Iran to enrich to 20 percent, which in addition to its peaceful uses is also the key technical hurdle for the enriched uranium pathway to a nuclear weapon, as enriching beyond 20 percent to weapons-grade levels is a relatively simpler process.

However, the initial agreement between Jalili and Burns was met with opposition in both of their respective capitals. Robert Einhorn, a senior U.S. nuclear
negotiator at the Geneva talks, told coauthor Hossein Mousavian his version of the events. Einhorn states there was “explicit agreement” with Jalili in Geneva over conducting the fuel swap, but that his Iranian counterparts said the agreement had yet to be “fully cleared” in Tehran. Once the two sides met again in November, Einhorn says, the Iranians came with a new proposal, which involved simultaneously swapping Iran’s LEU with TRR reactor fuel inside Iranian territory. “Jalili had run into opposition at home, and so we couldn’t go forward with it [the original swap proposal],” Einhorn said. 9

However, Iranian officials, namely then-UN ambassador Mohammad Khazaee and Atomic Energy Organization of Iran head Ali Akbar Salehi, have told coauthor Mousavian that Iran twice conveyed to the United States that it was ready to go through with the swap deal: once in November, when Iran suggested via International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Secretary General Mohamed ElBaradei a direct U.S.–Iran swap deal instead of relying on intermediaries such as France; and again in January 2010, when Iran communicated it was prepared to accept the original Jalili–Burns deal. 10 Khazaee gave this final offer to then-U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, who in response attached a never-before-discussed precondition to the deal: that Iran first cease all uranium enrichment. 11 Previously, in aftermath of the Jalili–Burns meeting, U.S. officials had stated that enrichment suspension was the “primary goal,” but had not attached it as a precondition to the proposed swap. 12 In conversations with co-author Mousavian, Einhorn, Burns, and White House National Security Council official Puneet Talwar all said they had no knowledge of the Khazaee–Rice meeting. 13

Iran’s Case for Enrichment

America’s refusal to accept peaceful uranium enrichment on Iranian soil had long been the key stumbling block in the nuclear negotiations, prior to Obama’s reelection. As signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Iran has the “inalienable right” for the “development, research, production, and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, without discrimination.” Moreover, according to Article IV of the NPT, “All the Parties to the Treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” 14 Accordingly, NPT signatories have the right to the nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes, including enrichment, and, to offset the risk of nuclear-weapons proliferation, are also entitled to receive nuclear technology. This view of the NPT has been acknowledged by former Obama White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of
Mass Destruction Gary Samore, who in January 2017 stated how the “vast majority of countries” believe the NPT confers a right to enrichment.  

However, the U.S. government not only long-opposed enrichment in Iran, but for decades obstructed the legal transfer of nuclear technologies and services to Iran. Due to its inability to lawfully import the prerequisite components, materials, and fuel for a civilian nuclear program, by the early 2000s Iran was left with no choice but to start its own enrichment program for nuclear fuel production. Indeed, until 2005, the United States opposed even Russia’s agreement with Iran to construct and fuel the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which it dropped only after Iran had established its indigenous mastery of the enrichment process.

With that said, from 2003–2005, as part of negotiations with the so-called EU3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) aimed at securing its NPT rights and removing concerns over the nature of its nuclear program, Iran voluntarily suspended uranium enrichment and agreed to implement enhanced transparency measures. From the outset, Tehran emphasized these measures were temporary and aimed at confidence building. In March 2005, the Iranian nuclear negotiating team made an offer to the EU3 with principles strikingly similar to the eventual 2015 JCPOA. The proposal outlined steps Iran was willing to take to alleviate concerns over both the enriched uranium and plutonium pathways to nuclear weapons. It stipulated that Iran would cap uranium enrichment at five percent, a level only suitable for peaceful purposes; convert enriched uranium stockpiles to forms that would make further enrichment (and thus potential weaponization) impossible; give verifiable guarantees to not separate or reprocess plutonium from the spent nuclear fuel of the then under-construction Arak heavy water reactor; and never build a plutonium reprocessing facility. The proposal also stated that Iran would implement the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement 3.1 to its IAEA safeguards agreement, allowing for the most stringent and intrusive inspection mechanisms devised by the agency.

The EU3, however, ultimately spurned the offer at the behest of the Bush administration, which took the maximalist position of refusing Iran’s NPT right to enrichment. Jack Straw, Britain’s foreign secretary at the time, later said of the lost opportunity: “[H]ad it not been for major problems within the U.S. administration under President Bush, we could have actually settled the whole Iran nuclear dossier back in 2005.”

**Obama’s Actions Diverges from Engagement Rhetoric**

Given the past context of the EU3 negotiations with Iran, then, for the Obama administration to demand a halt to enrichment in January 2010 as part of the
swap deal negotiations signaled to Tehran that Obama was not sincerely seeking mutual compromise. Obama faced two political constraints: the presence of White House figures who opposed offering nuclear concessions to Iran, such as National Security Council staff member Dennis Ross, and Ahmadinejad’s provocative rhetoric on issues like the Holocaust.

With the swap proving a dead end, in February 2010 Iran for the first time began enriching to 20 percent to produce its needed TRR fuel itself.\(^1\) At the same time, however, senior officials such as Salehi repeatedly communicated Iran’s willingness to cease the 20-percent enrichment process if Iran were given the fuel.\(^2\) This in turn triggered a new diplomatic effort for a swap deal by two unlikely countries: Brazil and Turkey. In May 2010, the three sides announced an agreement that would have seen 1200 kilograms of Iranian LEU moved to Turkey, where it was to remain under Iranian ownership until Iran received its corresponding supply of reactor fuel. Then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu acknowledged he had been in regular contact with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton while negotiating the agreement, “We were told that if Iran gives 1,200 kilograms without conditions, then the required atmosphere of trust would be created [to avoid sanctions]. So, if we do all these things, and they still talk about sanctions … [it] will damage the psychological trust that has been created.”\(^3\)

The Obama administration’s response to the Turkey–Brazil swap initiative only reinforced Tehran’s perception of the insincerity of Obama’s diplomatic rhetoric. One day after the agreement was announced, Secretary Clinton announced before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that new sanctions had been devised and were being sent to the UN Security Council.\(^4\) In June 2010, UNSC Resolution 1929 was passed, imposing the harshest UN-mandated sanctions of the nuclear crisis era, targeting Iranian shipping, banking, and restricting conventional arms imports and ballistic missile tests.\(^5\) Far-reaching unilateral U.S. sanctions followed, in the form of the July 2010 Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) and similar new sanctions by the EU.\(^6\)

The Failure of the “Dual Track”: Pressure Undermines Engagement

For Iran, the failure of the swap negotiations and the wave of new sanctions in 2010 were evidence enough that Obama would not match actions with words.
In fact, after the swap talks fell apart, the Obama White House declared a “dual-track” policy of increasing pressure and sanctions while claiming to keep diplomacy open as a possibility. WikiLeaks documents would later reveal that even in 2009, as President Obama publicly called for unconditional diplomacy centered on respect and not threats, administration officials were pressuring Europe, China, and Russia to agree to additional sanctions. Even before such revelations, the collapse of the swap talks and the passage of CISADA and other sanctions had already convinced Tehran that the United States was dedicated to the pressure track, not the diplomacy track. As such, just as during the Bush presidency, escalation came to characterize the nuclear dispute.

By seeking maximalist demands (such as zero enrichment) while drastically increasing pressure, the Obama administration’s dual-track policy not only failed in compelling Tehran to change its nuclear calculus, but brought the two sides to the brink of war. The long-standing modus operandi of Iranian leaders when it comes to addressing threats is to become inflexible, steadfast, and retaliatory. Indeed, a foundational belief of Iranian foreign policy is that to convey signals that could be interpreted as weakness is to invite even more egregious demands and pressure. Past experiences have shaped and validated this view, including the U.S. policies pursued after overtures by former Iranian presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami—with the former facilitating the release of Western hostages in Lebanon between 1990 and 1991 and offering major oil contracts to American firms, and Khatami providing decisive assistance in the 2001 campaign to overthrow the Taliban and proposing negotiations on a U.S.–Iran grand bargain. Rafsanjani accused the U.S. of reneging on assurances to release frozen Iranian assets, while Khatami’s diplomatic offer was met with the “we don’t talk to evil” mantra from then-Vice President Dick Cheney’s office.

From 2010–2012, the Obama administration did everything in its power to bring maximum pressure on Iran. In addition to multilateral and unilateral sanctions, Stuxnet, the world’s first cyberweapon, was deployed against Iran nuclear facilities in 2010, with Obama having approved the weapon within weeks of his inauguration. The covert sabotage also coincided with the assassination of numerous Iranian civilian scientists and professors, which major Western outlets later linked to Israeli intelligence. Dovetailing with the counterproductive actions of the Obama administration was Ahmadinejad’s aggressive rhetoric toward the United States and Israel, such as his peddling of September 11th conspiracy theories before the UN General Assembly. Obama’s first-term policies coupled with Ahmadinejad’s undiplomatic tenor all but ensured that engagement could not succeed.

President Obama’s first-term reliance on coercive tactics also consisted of explicit military threats. In August 2010, then-Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen, the highest-ranking U.S. military officer, stated: “Military
actions have been on the table and remain on the table.” Talk of an Israeli attack on Iran was also pervasive by 2012. A February 2012 Washington Post story titled “U.S. Officials Concerned by Israel Statements on Iran Threat, Possible Strike” quoted a former U.S. official as stating: “The Obama administration is concerned that Israel could attack Iranian nuclear facilities this year, having given Washington little or no warning.” In mid-2012, hard-hitting U.S. and European sanctions targeting Iran’s oil and banking sectors went into effect, cutting Iran out of most international trade and slashing its oil exports, the lifeblood of its economy. By the end of 2012, the Iranian currency had lost a third of its value and the country’s economy had plunged into recession.

While several rounds of official negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the five members of the UNSC plus Germany, also known by the moniker E3+3) took place during this escalatory period, they made little progress toward equitable compromise. As late as the April 2012 negotiations in Istanbul, the P5+1 was still demanding that Iran suspend all enrichment, contrary to its NPT rights. Secretary of State John Kerry even stated in December 2013 that the “whole point” of the sanctions regime was to “hopefully help Iran dismantle its nuclear program.” Even more detrimental to the prospects for successful diplomacy, in January 2012 The Washington Post quoted a “senior U.S. intelligence official” as proclaiming that the goal of sanctions was to “bring down the regime in Tehran.”

Despite the avalanche of pressure brought against it during the George W. Bush presidency and Obama’s first term, Iran never capitulated on its nuclear program. To the contrary, in line with the Iranian leadership’s established philosophy, it reciprocated the only way it could: by expanding its nuclear capacity. From the time of its spurned 2005 offer to the end of Obama’s first term, Iran did the following: built a second, fortified enrichment facility; increased its number of operational centrifuges from 164 to over 9,500; increased its stockpile of low-enriched uranium from 100kg to roughly 10,000kg; began enriching to 20 percent and amassed a 185kg stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium; and started to operationalize far more advanced and efficient centrifuges. All throughout this period, Iran also kept the diplomacy option open, with senior officials including President Ahmadinejad repeatedly stating their willingness to cease 20-percent enrichment, reduce stockpiles of fissile material, and implement broader transparency measures if Iran’s right to enrichment was recognized and sanctions lifted. At the peak of tensions, in September 2011, Ahmadinejad also made overtures such as releasing U.S. hikers suspected of spying.

By mid-2012, the tit-for-tat escalatory cycle had brought the two sides to the edge of conflict. American sanctions had already shut Iran out of much of international finance and trade, leaving little left to meaningfully sanction. Iran’s nuclear capacity had also reached a point where, by some estimates, its breakout time—the duration it would take it to amass the fissile material required for a
single nuclear weapon should it decide to do so—was down to one month. It was at this point, with open war the only option other than serious diplomacy, that the Obama White House decided to pursue direct negotiations. John Kerry would later say of the failure of the pressure track, “Folks, they already have what they want. They got it 10 years ago or more. They already have conquered the fuel cycle. When we began our negotiations, Iran had enough fissile material for ten to twelve bombs. They had 19,000 centrifuges up from the 163 that they had back in 2003 when the prior administration was engaged with them on this very topic.”\(^{44}\)

Contrary to claims in Washington of the efficacy of Iran sanctions, they failed to achieve their stated goals, which U.S. government officials at various points described as the closure of Iran’s enrichment program, the dismantling of Iran’s entire nuclear program, and even regime change. In his second term, with the only other options being to accept Iran as a nuclear threshold state with a small breakout window or war, Obama opted to take Iran up on its willingness to increase the transparency of its nuclear program on the basis of the NPT, which Iran had clearly indicated with its 2005 offer before any nuclear-related sanctions had been introduced. That said, sanctions did undoubt-
edly severely affect the livelihoods of ordinary Iranians, with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon lamenting in October 2013 how they had resulted “in an escalation in inflation, a rise in commodities and energy costs, an increase in the rate of unemployment and a shortage of necessary items, including medicine.”\(^{45}\)

A Backchannel for Engagement Opens

In July 2012, after Omani intermediaries communicated the Obama administration’s desire to have bilateral nuclear negotiations with Iran,\(^{46}\) U.S. and Iranian representatives met in Muscat for the first time since the 2009 Jalili–Barn meetings. Miscommunication surrounded these initial bilateral talks, with the Iranian delegation being told by Omani officials that formal negotiations for substantive negotiations were to take place. However, Puneet Talwar, the White House National Security Council director for the Persian Gulf at the time, would later tell coauthor Mousavian that the American side had never made such a suggestion to the Omani interlocutors. “From the beginning, we
made it clear to the Omanis that we were not coming for substantive negotia-
tions,” Talwar said. “This was a preparatory meeting to discuss the who,
what, where and when.” He further stated: “The Omanis, however, had told the
Iranian delegation that now that you’re here, have serious negotiations. But we
were not ready and had told them we weren’t. This was a miscommunication
that resulted in the authorities back in Tehran getting upset.”

While the July 2012 talks failed to reach any breakthrough, the two sides did
agree to keep the bilateral backchannel open. Their next meeting, held after
Obama’s reelection in March 2013, would prove to be a turning point in the
nuclear crisis. The talks were attended by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, who for
the first time conveyed directly to his Iranian counter-
part that the United States was prepared to accept
limited enrichment on Iranian soil as part of a com-
prehensive nuclear deal. Then-Iranian Foreign Min-
ister Ali Akbar Salehi, who was not at the Oman talks
but privy to them, has said to coauthor Mousavian of
the March 2013 meeting, “Mr. Burns, in the presence
of Sultan Qaboos, declared that America respects
Iran’s right to nuclear enrichment. This was followed
by the Sultan writing a letter to the Leader telling of
Burns’ declaration. After this, the central issue of our right to enrichment was
finally solved. Before it, the Americans had always told us there could be no
enrichment in Iran whatsoever.”

The Omani backchannel was decisive, as it allowed U.S. and Iranian represen-
tatives to directly negotiate—out of the public eye and without worry of political
backlash—and agree to an end-state to the nuclear dispute. This agreed end-state
would preserve Iran’s civilian nuclear rights, including enrichment, while reducing
the proliferation risk of its nuclear program, thereby satisfying each side’s core
interests. By allowing the two sides to make their intentions clear, the bilateral
Omani backchannel opened the door for the formal P5+1 negotiations to make
progress.

**Nuclear Engagement Bears Fruit**

A few months after the deadlock-breaking Oman talks, in June 2013, former chief
Iranian nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani won an upset victory in the Iranian
presidential elections. In a crowded field of six candidates, of which he was the
only centrist, Rouhani ran on a platform highlighting Iran’s dire economic
straits and calling for better ties with the outside world, more foreign trade and
tourism, and the diplomatic resolution of the nuclear crisis. “It’s good to have centrifuges running,” he famously declared in a presidential debate, “provided people’s lives and sustenance are also spinning.”

With Rouhani’s election and a second-term President Obama embracing serious diplomatic engagement, the U.S.–Iran relationship would in the ensuing three years change in ways inconceivable since 1979. Fresh from electoral victories, both Presidents Rouhani and Obama were ready to expend the necessary political capital to cash in their respective bargaining chips of nuclear capacity and sanctions to reach what diplomats on both sides came to call a “win-win” compromise. In 19 months of negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 reached first an interim deal in Geneva in November 2013, known as the “Joint Plan of Action” (JPOA), then a “Framework Agreement” in April 2015 in Lausanne, and finally the conclusive “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA) in Vienna on July 14, 2015.

With the JCPOA, all nuclear-related U.S. and EU sanctions on Iran were lifted, and UNSC Resolution 2231 was passed endorsing the deal and voiding six previous nuclear-related UNSC resolutions. Iran, for its part, agreed to time-limited restraints on its nuclear program, of a nature similar to its March 2005 offer, while maintaining its enrichment program and nuclear fuel cycle infrastructure. Specifically, the JPOA and JCPOA stipulated eight to fifteen years of stringent limitations that, according to the Obama administration, increased Iran’s breakout time to one year. These limitations most significantly included: a cessation of 20-percent enrichment and the conversion or dilution of Iran’s stockpile of 20-percent enriched uranium; a reduction in the number of operational centrifuges from 9,500 to 5,060; a reduction in the stockpile of low-enriched uranium from 10,000kg to 300; and the modification of the Arak heavy water reactor to drastically reduce its potential output of plutonium. Additionally, Iran would not build a plutonium reprocessing facility and cap enrichment at 3.67 percent for 15 years.

The Obama Administration’s Break with the Past

Beyond the agreements themselves, the nuclear negotiations transformed the character of the U.S.–Iran relationship. After 35 years of being sworn enemies and barely communicating outside of hostile rhetoric, regular constructive dialogue became an accepted norm for both governments. Indeed, by the end of the Obama administration, Washington’s “no-contact” policy with Iranian officials had been thoroughly discarded. The channels of communication established in the course of nuclear engagement included unprecedented one-on-one contacts, not just between Foreign Minister Zarif and Secretary Kerry, but with
other senior cabinet officials such as U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and Iranian Atomic Energy Chief Ali Akbar Salehi; U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew and Iranian Central Bank Governor Valiollah Seif; and between a host of mid-level diplomats and experts. Presidents Rouhani and Obama also shared a historic phone conversation during the 2013 UN General Assembly, and Foreign Minister Zarif and President Obama shook hands at the 2015 UN General Assembly.\textsuperscript{55}

In addition to regular communication, the U.S.–Iran relationship took on new symbolism, with Kerry and Zarif at times going on private walks and engaging in “productive” and “positive” talks.\textsuperscript{56} Each side also demonstrably displayed its commitment to making the negotiations a success, as exemplified by the final round of negotiations leading to the JCPOA. This marked the longest consecutive stretch American diplomats had spent negotiating on foreign soil since the 1919 Versailles peace conference after World War I.\textsuperscript{57}

Significantly, the Obama administration’s second-term approach to nuclear engagement also embodied a departure from the U.S. government’s traditional view of Iran and its regional role. While President Obama always maintained that nuclear engagement was not aimed at fundamentally reshaping U.S.–Iran relations, he made no secret of his openness to a new, more cooperative relationship. “[W]e will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities,” Obama told \textit{The New York Times} in April 2015, “But I say that hoping that we can conclude this diplomatic arrangement—and that it ushers a new era in U.S.–Iranian relations—and, just as importantly, over time, a new era in Iranian relations with its neighbors.”\textsuperscript{58} In the JCPOA’s immediate aftermath, in August 2015, Obama also said in response to a question by CNN’s Fareed Zakaria, on whether “overlapping interests might allow for a more productive and constructive” U.S.–Iran relationship, that it was “conceivable” but that the “premise of the deal” was not based on a “strategic reassessment of the relationship.”\textsuperscript{59}

On multiple occasions, Obama and senior officials in his administration also conveyed a sense of respect for Iran and its history and acknowledged past U.S. wrongdoings towards Iran. Obama told \textit{The New York Times} in April 2015, “[P]art of the psychology of Iran is rooted in past experiences, the sense that their country was undermined, that the United States or the West meddled first in their democracy, then in supporting the Shah, and then in supporting Iraq and Saddam during that extremely brutal war.”\textsuperscript{60}

At times, Obama also discussed Iran’s innate strengths, speaking in December 2014 of the country’s “incredible talent and resources and sophistication” and declaring it could be a “very successful regional
power.” Secretary Kerry also echoed Obama in emphasizing respect during the negotiations. In a 2017 interview, for instance, he stressed Iran was a “very proud nation with a long history” and that “one of the key words that always entered into our negotiations was ‘mutual respect.’”

On the region, the Obama administration’s rhetoric during and after the nuclear negotiations signaled yet another major break from longstanding U.S. policy. In April 2015, Obama said of U.S. interests in the Middle East: “[A]t this point, the U.S.’s core interests in the region are not oil, are not territorial …. Our core interests are that everybody is living in peace, that it is orderly … Our interests in this sense are really just making sure that the region is working.”

In line with this strategic outlook, Obama made clear his desire for a regional balance of power that would establish a stabilizing equilibrium between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In March 2015, he called on Saudi Arabia and Iran to “share” the region, telling Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic, “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.”

A top Obama National Security Council official, Rob Malley, has said to coauthor Mousavian that U.S. arms deals to Saudi Arabia during Obama’s tenure were partly aimed at fostering a stabilizing balance between Iran and its Persian Gulf neighbors. “There is a feeling among the Gulf countries that Iran has been an ascendant power,” Malley said to Mousavian. “There is a perception of imbalance in terms of capacity of one side to advance their interests.” He further stated: “If we were going to get to the position where they were going to be at the same table, they have to feel more comfortable doing it … we need these countries to be strengthened in order to be able to have a more balanced conversation with Iran, in order to promote resolution and engagement.”

Obama for his part also abstained from seeking to isolate Iran or scapegoat it for the region’s ills, as U.S. presidents had long done, and called on U.S. Arab allies not to blame Iran for all their problems and instead have a “practical conversation” with the country. In 2016, he described U.S. regional allies as “high maintenance” and proclaimed they sought to “exploit American muscle for their own narrow and sectarian ends.”

Obama-era officials also suggested the nuclear deal opened the door for the United States and Iran to more effectively address regional crises where they had mutual interests, such as the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda as well as fostering political settlements in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. To this end, in March 2015, U.S. Joint Chiefs’ Chairman Martin Dempsey proclaimed that Iran’s efforts against ISIS in Iraq “will in the main have been a positive thing.” After the JCPOA was reached, Secretary Kerry also spoke in optimistic terms about its
implications for the region, stating, “I know that a Middle East that is on fire is going to be more manageable with this deal and opens more potential for us to be able to deal with those fires, whether it is Houthi in Yemen or ISIL in Syria and Iraq, than no deal and the potential of another confrontation with Iran at the same time.”

In terms of translating the Obama administration’s rhetoric on potential broader U.S.–Iran engagement into action in the aftermath of the JCPOA, several important developments occurred. This included the United States dropping for the first time its opposition to Iran participating in the Geneva diplomatic process for resolving the current Syrian civil war. After Iran joined the talks in November 2015, the first ceasefire in the conflict was successfully negotiated. In January 2016, the diplomatic channels opened by the negotiations also ensured the speedy release of ten U.S. sailors who had drifted into Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf. In less than 24 hours, the sailors’ release was secured after Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Zarif were able to clear up misunderstandings over the phone. Within days of the sailor incident, a major prisoner swap also occurred, which saw U.S. and Iranian security establishments cooperate for the first time, and a decades-long legal battle over money owed to Iran for pre-revolution military purchases was settled.

**Nuclear Engagement’s Overarching Challenges**

For all its promise, nuclear engagement faced serious setbacks during the overlapping terms of Rouhani and Obama. Chiefly, these derived from counterproductive framings of the nuclear deal, the actions of critical domestic forces, constraints to proper Iranian sanctions relief, and the machinations of U.S. regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The JCPOA itself, however, was firmly entrenched on the Iranian side by the end of Obama’s presidency, with the IAEA, the JCPOA’s “Joint Commission” arbitrating body, and the U.S. State Department all certifying complete Iranian compliance. However, while all levels of the Iranian government and body politic have upheld the JCPOA, nuclear engagement resulted in an extraordinary backlash to the idea of further U.S.–Iran engagement in both countries. In Iran, this reaction was rooted in what many deemed were America’s malign intentions with engagement and unfaithfulness in delivering on its JCPOA obligations.

Undermining U.S.–Iran engagement were problems Iran encountered receiving sanctions relief.
from the deal. The overriding obstacle was that major international banks were unwilling to finance Iranian trade agreements. The issue was twofold. First, a U.S. ban on “dollar-clearing” for Iran remained in effect, preventing foreign banks wishing to facilitate Iran-related transactions from accessing the U.S. financial system to conduct transactions in U.S. dollars—the currency that most major international trade is conducted in. This had the effect of impeding Iran’s ability to engage in international trade and repatriate its frozen assets. Second, international banks and investors continued to stay away from Iran for fear of violating the spider web of still-existing non-nuclear U.S. sanctions.75

Coercive U.S. actions after the JCPOA further stymied Iranian sanctions relief. In 2016 alone, Iranian officials cited numerous U.S. actions as undermining the JCPOA, including new U.S. visa waiver laws that discriminated against international travel to Iran,76 new sanctions over ballistic missile tests,77 and a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that subjected $2 billion of Iranian assets in the United States to lawsuits.78 The Iranian government in unison also lambasted the November 2016 renewal of the Iran Sanctions Act, which Obama did not sign but allowed to be passed into law, as a direct violation of the nuclear deal.79

The Obama administration was also under immense domestic pressure for its nuclear engagement with Iran. During the negotiations, the administration fended off repeat attempts at sabotage by Congressional hawks. While Obama could veto sanctions bills, which he consistently threatened to do, he could not prevent actions such as a March 2015 letter by 47 Republican senators to the “leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” warning that any deal reached with Obama would be futile as it could be undone with a “stroke of the pen.”80 Shortly before the letter, then-House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) also broke all precedent by circumventing the White House and inviting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to denounce the negotiations before both houses of Congress.81

Israel was not the only foreign state attempting to scuttle the negotiations either, with Saudi Arabia massively increasing its lobbying apparatus in Washington during the nuclear engagement period. A 2016 Al Monitor report revealed that Saudi Arabia “more than doubled its already hefty lobbying budget” in 2015, in large part to prevent a nuclear deal.82 In late November 2014, at a point in the negotiations where agreement seemed imminent, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal even flew to talks in Vienna and met with Secretary Kerry on his plane on the airport tarmac. Following the meeting, the negotiations then abruptly fell apart, and the deadline to reach a deal had to be extended from November 24, 2014 to June 30, 2015.83

After the JCPOA was reached, its opponents in the United States did not let up on their attacks either. Accusations ranged from Obama accepting secret “side deals” to bribing Iran for the release of American prisoners.84 In Congress, lobbyist
pressure from groups such as the pro-Israel Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), which reportedly led attacks on the deal, spurred a wave of sanctions legislation to kill the deal and return the U.S.–Iran relationship to a state of unremitting hostility. A July 2016 Politico piece highlighted Congressional efforts to sabotage the deal, stating: “Members of Congress—advised by FDD, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, UANI (United Against Nuclear Iran) and others—are considering more than 30 pieces of fresh sanctions legislation to pressure Iran anew.” By the end of 2016, the number of anti-Iran sanctions bills introduced in Congress had mushroomed to over 80.

Despite immense domestic pressures, the Obama administration did attempt to ameliorate problems Iran was having with sanctions relief and instill confidence in international banks to conduct business with Iran, going so far as dispatching Secretary Kerry to personally clear up misunderstandings of U.S. sanctions policy. However, these efforts ultimately had little tangible effect, leading the administration to point blame at Iran’s financial sector, which some U.S. officials said was “antiquated” and detracted foreign investment. Obama officials also complained about Iranian actions after the deal harming relations with accusations revolving around Iran’s regional activities, ballistic missile program, and boat actions in the Persian Gulf.

All throughout the nuclear negotiations, Iran’s highest decision maker, Ayatollah Khamenei, emphasized his distrust of the United States while signaling that the negotiations would be a criterion for whether Iran could trust the United States. Two months before the JCPOA, in April 2015, he significantly declared that if the nuclear negotiations were to end without “ambiguity,” it would be “an experience showing it’s possible to negotiate with them [the West] on other issues.” Foreign Minister Zarif also confirmed this to Secretary Kerry during the nuclear talks, stating: “If we get this finished, I am now empowered to work with and talk to you about regional issues.” However, post-deal developments, especially rhetoric by U.S. officials regarding Iranian politics as well as serious problems Iran faced attaining sanctions relief, would shatter this possibility for broader engagement and result in a sharp uptick in anti-American rhetoric in Iran.

Despite statements by Obama and senior administration officials suggesting a readiness to build on the JCPOA and forge a new relationship with Iran, comments by officials reflecting a desire to alter Iranian politics helped sink this potential. For instance, with the nuclear deal coming together in April 2015, Obama raised the possibility that it could “strengthen the hand of those more moderate
forces inside of Iran.”

In a July 2015 interview, Obama also caveated his response to a question on whether Iran would change after the deal by stating that “initially, we have a much more modest goal here, which is to make sure Iran does not have a nuclear weapon.” He then floated the possibility that Iran “may change” with the nuclear deal.

Comments by other White House officials, such as Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security advisor for strategic communication, also suggested an underlying hope, though not overt aim, in the administration for the JCPOA to empower certain parts of the Iranian government over others. Rhodes stated in 2015, “I would prefer that it turns out that Rouhani and [Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad] Zarif are real reformers who are going to be steering this country into the direction that I believe it can go in, because their public is educated and, in some respects, pro-American. But we are not betting on that.”

Robert Gates, who served as U.S. Defense Secretary during Obama’s first term, has also given credence to this narrative, stating in May 2015, “I think that the pursuit of the agreement is based on the President’s hope that over a ten-year period with the sanctions being lifted that the Iranians … will abandon their ideology, their theology, their revolutionary principles, their meddling in various parts of the region.”

To be sure, while the Obama administration was careful to never directly link the JCPOA to any policy to “reform” the Iranian government—and its subtle rhetoric in this regard was likely aimed at quelling domestic pressures and politically selling the deal—the impression given to many in Iran was that the United States sought “soft regime change,” i.e. changing the government from within. Ayatollah Khamenei stated in this regard in October 2015, “Through negotiations Americans seek to influence Iran … but there are naive people in Iran who don’t understand this. We are in a critical situation now as the enemies are trying to change the mentality of our officials and our people on the revolution and our national interests.”

In the fall of 2015, in the JCPOA’s wake, Ayatollah Khamenei also outright banned further U.S.–Iran negotiations beyond the nuclear issue and warned of “economic and security breaches” and “political and cultural infiltration” by hostile foreign forces. He declared in October 2015, “We approved talks with the United States about the nuclear issue specifically. We have not allowed talks with the U.S. in other fields, and we will not negotiate with them … What is forbidden is this. Negotiation with America is forbidden, because of its countless detriments and because of alleged advantages of which it has none whatsoever.”

Subsequently, domestic opponents of President Rouhani did not forgo taking advantage of the Obama administration’s rhetoric on the JCPOA’s potential political implications and Ayatollah Khamenei’s caution on foreign infiltration.
While the negotiations were ongoing, Rouhani’s conservative rivals had mobilized into a grouping dubbed “the worried” (delvapasan), and regularly made alarmist claims about alleged concessions at the negotiating table. At the time, however, their language was relatively more measured due to Ayatollah Khamenei’s explicit support of the negotiations and of Iran’s diplomats. After the deal and after American talk about it affecting Iranian politics, however, Rouhani’s rivals took a no-holds-barred approach in attacking him.

In the aftermath of the deal, Rouhani and members of his cabinet were targeted not just by conservative newspaper columnists and parliamentarians, but also by prominent Friday Prayer leaders and Revolutionary Guards commanders. One conservative MP, Javad Karimi-Ghodousi, routinely leveled unsubstantiated accusations, including that Rouhani sought “seven JCPOAs,” with the subsequent “JCPOAs” being acquiescence to U.S. demands ranging from giving up Iran’s missile program to ending support for Hezbollah. Goudousi has also claimed that four American “spies” from within Iran somehow managed the nuclear negotiations and forged the JCPOA. Another leading deal critic, Mashhad Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, directly disparaged Rouhani’s engagement foreign policies, declaring they “target the values and dear life of the revolution.” The head of Iran’s judiciary, Ayatollah Amoli Larijani, also at times joined the fray, calling on one occasion for Rouhani to heed the “sour and important” lessons of the JCPOA. Others, such as Ayatollah Khamenei’s representative in the Revolutionary Guards, Ali Saeedi, accused members of the Rouhani administration of holding “reactionary beliefs” with respect to negotiations with the United States and of creating “ground for the enemy to pursue regime change.”

Importantly, key differences existed in the nature of the opposition to the JCPOA in Iran and the United States. In the United States, Republicans unanimously opposed the deal when it came up for vote in Congress in September 2015, and virtually all of the 2016 Republican presidential contenders promised to rescind it—especially Donald Trump, who regularly called it a “horrible deal” and even suggested it could lead to a “nuclear holocaust.” Given the divide in official Washington on the negotiations and eventual JCPOA, U.S. credibility on offering incentives to Tehran and meeting its JCPOA obligations was never fully assured. However, in Iran, while there was much criticism directed at the negotiations and U.S.–Iran engagement in
general, no political institution, party, or figure has called for the JCPOA to be revoked. This is due to the endorsement of the deal by all of the four decision-making centers in Iran: the presidency, parliament, Supreme National Security Council, and Supreme Leader.

Lessons of Engagement

The experience of U.S.–Iran engagement on resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis holds a number of lessons for future dealings between the two countries. Above all, nuclear engagement revealed that both sides stand to gain far more through diplomatic engagement than confrontation. Nuclear engagement’s success also serves as evidence that policies of pressure and coercion not only fail with respect to Iran, but achieve the opposite effect and result in dangerous escalation. With that said, a holistic view of the nuclear engagement period, its broader context, the obstacles it faced, and reasons it failed to lead to broader U.S.–Iran dialogue, uncovers six core lessons. These should offer guidance if the two countries opt for diplomatic engagement again in the future.

Domestic Consensus Between Major Political Forces

The opposition to the nuclear negotiations, the JCPOA, and U.S.–Iran engagement overall was severe in Washington and Tehran. Rouhani and Obama simply could not establish consensus in support of sustained engagement between their countries in their respective political systems. This was especially the case in the United States, where the Obama administration was unable to remove impediments to the JCPOA’s smooth implementation. Furthermore, hawkish rhetoric in Washington, along with new sanctions such as the November 2016 renewal of the Iran Sanctions Act also proved destructive to Tehran’s faith in any engagement with the United States. In Iran, the explosive charges leveled against Rouhani and his allies also raised the stakes to such an extent that supporters of engagement risked their political reputations and careers.

In the future, domestic challenges must be better managed. Critically, U.S.–Iran engagement must be pursued in a way that minimizes its effect on partisan politics and ensures every major political current has a stake in its success. Rival political parties, whether it be Republicans and Democrats in the United States or reformists and principlists in Iran, should stand to lose together or win together, so that no single party is able to take credit for diplomatic successes. To this end, leaders on both sides must be careful not to frame negotiations in ways meant to score political points against their rivals, which only invites sabotage.
Incorporate Non-Interference in Political Affairs as a Guiding Principle

In the aftermath of the JCPOA, rhetoric out of Washington expressing hope for the empowerment of “moderates” in Tehran immensely damaged the proponents of U.S.–Iran engagement inside Iran and prospects for future successful diplomacy between the two countries. Statements by U.S. officials conveying hope for change in Iran’s domestic political balance, regardless of how hypothetical they were, naturally elicited a strong reaction from many inside Iran. The Iranian public at large is profoundly wary of anything that can be construed as foreign intervention in its domestic affairs, given the country’s modern history of being subject to brutal foreign domination.

Going forward, non-interference in domestic political affairs must be a key principle of any U.S. engagement policy towards Iran. Rhetoric or policies that could be interpreted as reflecting a desire to create friction in the Iranian political landscape must be avoided, as they would not only eliminate chances for successful engagement in the short term, but would unite the majority of Iranians against U.S.–Iran engagement well into the future. The 2017 Iranian presidential elections, which reelected Rouhani by a large margin, demonstrated not only the democratic aspect of Iran’s political system, but that ultimately the Iranian public is the main decider of Iranian policies.

Minimize Foreign Intervention

During the nuclear engagement period, U.S. regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel felt they had something to lose if the United States were to rebalance its relationships in the Persian Gulf and have dialogue with Iran. As such, they turned every political lever they could in Washington to obstruct engagement and move the United States back to its traditional confrontational approach toward Iran. Given the impressive lobbying infrastructure possessed by Israel and Saudi Arabia in Washington, their stance on U.S.–Iran engagement translated into real pressure from Congress, various influential advocacy groups, and media personalities and columnists. These actions gave Tehran the perception that the U.S. government could not act independently of its regional allies when it comes to its Iran policy. Indeed, if not for the outsized influence of these U.S. allies on Capitol Hill, the U.S. and Iran may have been able to build the requisite amount of trust during the course of the nuclear negotiations to reach a more far-reaching peace with each other, as Obama was able to do with Cuba.

While the influence of special interest groups in U.S. politics is part and parcel with the American political system, U.S. decision makers should know that they can only maximize their national interests if no other country, whether ally or competitor, has veto power over their decisions. With respect to Iran, they should be cognizant that other regional countries benefit from aggrandizing
alleged threats they face from Iran and maximizing their own interests, regardless of whether they are detrimental to American interests.

**Sustainability: The Criteria for Future Negotiations**

The JCPOA was implemented in January 2016, roughly the same time the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign was beginning. During the course of the race, the deal came under vociferous criticism from virtually all the Republican presidential candidates, with most promising to rescind the deal, including Donald Trump. Coupled with Congressional actions against the deal, the signal sent to Iran was that reaching a deal with an American president carries little weight and is not guaranteed to be lasting. While the Trump administration is currently in the process of reviewing the nuclear deal, the United States is ratcheting up other sanctions related to alleged human rights abuses and the country’s ballistic missile program. Such circumstances do nothing to instill confidence in Tehran that it should build on the deal and reach other compromises with the United States.

Since the Iranian Revolution, mutual lack of trust has been a major impediment to improving the U.S.–Iran relationship. Past experience under the Rafsanjani, Khatami, and even Ahmadinejad presidencies has solidified in the Iranian leadership a belief that the United States is at best an unreliable partner, and at worst a deceitful negotiator that cannot be trusted in any circumstances. The JCPOA represents a fork in the road: if the United States follows through on its commitments, its credibility in the eyes of Iranians will gain an important boost; however, if it fails to properly uphold the JCPOA, the damage to its future ability to negotiate with Iranians of all political stripes will be decisive.

**Keep Expectations in Check**

Another major misstep with nuclear engagement was that both Tehran and Washington overpromised what the deal would accomplish, and thus set themselves up for disappointment with the JCPOA. In Iran, rhetoric surrounding the negotiations often suggested a nuclear deal would alleviate many of Iran’s economic hardships and lead to a conclusive end to hostile American polices. On the U.S. side, the impression among many in Washington’s foreign policy establishment was that America’s differences with Iran in the region would be resolved. In effect, people in both countries expected the outcome of a grand bargain from
piecemeal nuclear engagement. Future engagement between the United States and Iran should not allow room for interpretation on the end-goals of negotiations. These should be made clear upfront, which will help make end-goals easier to reach and avoid unnecessary criticism. There is of course a tendency by every government to oversell its achievements, but the price of false hope is always greater than that of tempered expectations.

**Reciprocate Conciliatory Language, Tone, and Action**

During nuclear engagement, the Obama administration signaled it was prepared to change the underlying dynamic of the U.S.–Iran relationship. The administration’s rhetoric during the talks bestowed a level of legitimacy on the Iranian government and its regional and international role that was always lacking from previous U.S. presidents. However, even during Obama’s second term, this more conciliatory language was always couched in negative and counterproductive rhetoric from the administration—about Iranian actions in the region, Iran’s human rights track record, and references to the evergreen U.S. threat of “all options are on the table.”

Coupled with the aggressive actions of Congress, Iranian leaders were ultimately sent a mixed message on U.S. intentions and thus responded in a tit-for-tat manner to provocative statements by U.S. officials and political figures. As such, durable U.S.–Iran engagement requires each side’s positive intentions to be clearly made and be reflected as such through all governmental messaging bodies in a consistent manner to the extent reasonably possible.

Nuclear engagement demonstrated that the success of U.S.–Iran engagement rests largely on the political dynamics in Tehran and Washington. Only with an alignment of leaders willing to stake political capital on bilateral diplomacy, peaceful rhetoric, and mutual compromise could engagement have a chance to succeed. While Rouhani and Obama successfully negotiated the JCPOA, opponents managed to sow enough distrust to put the brake on further engagement. If a renewed engagement effort is to be successful, each side must use language that signifies to the other a strategic shift in their approach without leaving room for misunderstanding.

**What’s Next?**

The three years of U.S.–Iran nuclear engagement proved that dialogue between Tehran and Washington was not only possible, but also able to resolve a seemingly intractable crisis. Nuclear engagement effectively brought a nation of 80 million out of unparalleled economic strangulation, opening remarkably active channels of communications between two influential powers that just a few years earlier had been on the cusp of war. Just as importantly, it showed that peace between
the U.S. and Iranian governments is possible, and the two sides can cooperate on matters of mutual interest. Nuclear engagement also made imaginable for the first time a more stable region, where the United States and Iran could talk to one another about issues where their interests collide.

Iran and the United States have serious differences remaining on issues related to terrorism, human rights, weapons of mass destruction, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the region. At the same time, they have many common interests such as the fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups, and even prominent U.S. strategists such as Henry Kissinger have described the two countries as "natural allies."

Ultimately, Washington and Tehran have two choices: to continue the path of hostility they have been on for nearly 40 years, or to continue diplomatic engagement. If they choose engagement, they must learn from and build on the 2013–2016 period of nuclear discussion. Successful engagement between them will be felt beyond just their bilateral relations, and will positively affect regional crises and global threats, such as terrorism, for years to come.

Notes


60. Friedman, “Iran and the Obama Doctrine.”


63. Thomas Friedman, “Iran and the Obama Doctrine.”


93. Thomas Friedman, “Obama Makes His Case on Iran Nuclear Deal.”


100. Enghelab News, “The names of three other nuclear spies have been revealed, the JCPOA was administrated and written from a location other than the Cobourg hotel,” May 2, 2017, http://enghelab-news.ir/shownews.php?idnews=45964, [in Farsi].


102. Entekhab News, “Ayatollah Amoli Larijani: the JCPOA was a sour and important experience, based on this experience, the president should show a reaction to America,” January 30, 2017, http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/320388/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%8C-%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%84%AE-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%84%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C-%D8%B3-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%A7-%D8%B2-%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A9%DB%8C-%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DA%A9%DB%8A-%D9%88%DB%87-%D8%AF-%D9%86%DB%84%DB%8A-%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%AA, [in Farsi].
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