Iran and the Nuclear Deal

April 29, 2015
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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
The April 2 announcement in Lausanne of a framework for an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program has raised profound hopes and fears for the future of the Middle East. There are few developments with greater potential for fundamentally altering the political dynamics of the region – a prospect that fills skeptics with as much dread as it fuels optimism among supporters. To explore the many ramifications of the potential deal, the Project on Middle East Political Science convened a virtual symposium for the Monkey Cage. These essays have now been collected into an edition of the POMEPS Studies series, available for free download.

The American public debate about the deal over the last month has primarily focused upon U.S. policy options and the details of the proposed agreement. The essays in this collection delve into such issues in depth: Michael Brown and Chantal de Jonge Oudraat explain why no better deal is on the table; Joshua Rovner explains why it matters that U.S. intelligence got Iran’s nuclear program right; Nick Miller and Or Rabinowitz show how the deal is in line with traditional U.S. nonproliferation policy; Steven Kull and Shibley Telhami investigate American public opinion toward a deal; Thomas Doyle explores the symbolic dimensions of the negotiations; and Austin Long argues that the deal limits Iranian options and will test Iran’s intentions in ways that even hawks should appreciate.

Iran’s domestic politics have generally received less attention. The essays collected here offer an exceptionally nuanced profile of the issues and actors in play in the Iranian political system. The sheer extent and nature of the domestic debate over the deal is notable in its own right, as Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar explains in detail. Iranian debates have not broken down along traditional lines of moderates and hard-liners, as Shervin Malakzadeh carefully observes, but rather reflect a more fluid and fragmented factional array. Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Ali Honari trace the willingness of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to negotiate to the legacies of the grass-roots movements that followed the contentious 2009 presidential election. As Farzan Sabet observes, Iran’s conservatives are divided internally and struggling to find the right tone amidst the new realities. Iran’s parliament, facing competitive elections, carefully tracks with the trends in public opinion. Iran’s nuclear scientists themselves represent a potentially important constituency, especially if the deal is ultimately operationalized. Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei seeks to hedge bets and keep a delicate balance among the factions, with an eye towards sanctions relief – which itself, as Kevan Harris argues, would intersect in complex ways with the Iranian political economy that sanctions have molded.

Finally, the prospect of a nuclear deal has emerged at a time of rising sectarianism, profound uncertainty and political instability in the Arab states of the Gulf. Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai explain why the deal is unlikely to trigger the feared cascade of nuclear proliferation. At least in the short term, however, it has already fueled rampaging sectarianism, with pernicious effects which Frederic Wehrey analyzes regionally, Jeff Colgan traces in the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen and can be seen domestically in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Arab states are attempting to formulate a common front in the face of these challenges, but their efforts seem unlikely to bridge the deep regional divides.
The nuclear framework has not yet been finalized into an agreement, of course. The intense political opposition to the deal in the United States, Israel, many Arab regimes and parts of the Iranian regime may ultimately prevent it from being ratified or implemented. Deeply entrenched interests, narratives and identities are threatened by the prospect of a shifting relationship between the United States and Iran, and there is a nearly infinite list of possible spoilers that could derail progress. The essays collected in “Iran and the Nuclear Deal” offer a deep, empirically rich and analytically astute examination that should help to inform scholars, journalists, policymakers and the public about this historic opportunity.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
April 29, 2015
Where Iran’s hard-liners diverge from the moderates

By Shervin Malekzadeh, Swarthmore College

The domestic politics of nuclear energy plays out in this context. Nuclear negotiations are viewed as the latest front in an ongoing defensive war over Iranian sovereignty, one that makes reference to loss of the Caucuses to the Russians in the treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchai during the 19th century, a trauma replicated in the 1908 shelling of the first Majles by the Russian-led Cossack Brigade, the British and American-led 1953 coup and the 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran. The call back to Mossadegh at the airport, the constant reminders to American audiences that Iran “has not invaded another country in 250 years” and the overbearing demands that Iran be treated with...
“dignity” by its adversaries all speak to a shared trauma of foreign interventions and local betrayals, a collective memory that is as much a source of strength as it is a trap. When Zarif and President Hassan Rouhani proclaim to foreign journalists and state media that they came away from the negotiations with a great deal, they are not simply playing to their constituencies at home. They are reassuring their audience, and perhaps themselves, that Iran's integrity was not undermined in the meeting rooms of Lausanne, Switzerland.

The hard line in Iran, then, spools out at the point of capitulation to American demands. Opponents of negotiations simply do not believe that it is possible to engage honestly with the United States. From their perspective, it is the American regime that is intransigent, reflexively anti-Iranian and anti-Muslim, driven exclusively by an implacable faith in its own exceptionalism and ideological commitment to world domination.

Disputes between conservatives and reformists about exactly where the point of capitulation lies have been a source of contentious politics that stretches back at least as far as the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. In interviews just days before the 2009 presidential election, supporters of hard-line candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad described to me how the 2002 revelation of the secret nuclear site at Natanz had constituted a national “betrayal” by then-President Mohammad Khatami. Although they respected reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi for his unimpeachable service as prime minister during the worst years of the war with Iraq, these conservative voters expressed that they viewed the reformists as little more than a stalking horse for forces bent on destroying Iran through “un-Islamic” reforms and making the country weak before its enemies.

The belief of Iran's conservatives that their rivals can only act in bad faith appears to have changed little in the intervening years. If anything, their skepticism has only become worse with the loss of executive power, etched in the screeds of the conservative press, who regularly accuse the Rouhani administration of malfeasance and cravenly seeking the approval and acceptance of the enemy. “The winner of any deal will be the Islamic Republic not reformists who wanted to surrender to western powers and give up the whole nuclear programme,” Hamid-Reza Taraghi, a conservative politician, recently stated to the Financial Times. He added, “Even Western powers know that any nuclear agreement can happen only thanks to the guidance of the supreme leader.”

Like their counterparts in Iran, members of the Obama administration have faced an “unusual coalition” of criticism by certain members of Congress, including members of the president’s own party. Opponents of the diplomatic path level all manner of hand-wringing accusations, including claims that the strategy of unconditional engagement has weakened American standing in the world, that the president harbors a secret desire for popularity, of wanting to be a star more than a statesman and of wanting to produce a diplomatic legacy, even if it comes at the cost of national security. “We need to make clear to Iran,” Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-Tex.) asserted on a recent radio talk show, “you can play silly games with our president that buys into them and our secretary of state, but the American people aren’t buying it and you’re going to pay a price.”

The problem for Gohmert and his allies on Capitol Hill is that the American people are in fact buying into diplomacy as a viable alternative to war. Legislative leaders in the United States currently run behind their respective populations by overwhelming margins on the question of Iran. It is one of the great ironies that democratically elected members of Congress have so far been better insulated from public opinion than their counterparts in the Iranian Majles. It is not lost on Iranian audiences that foreign policy and statecraft in the United States are increasingly driven by partisan concerns for the security of America’s key regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, instead of bipartisan consensus around the national defense.

As the process of diplomacy has moved forward over the past two years, there are signs that the gap between elite and
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public opinion may be easier to reconcile in Tehran than in Washington. The dynamics of Iranian politics — in which the absence of democratic institutions compels leaders to cast a wary eye on an unhappy populace lest they take to the streets, coupled with the presence of a supreme leader who so far appears committed to seeing negotiations through — makes consensus a real possibility. There is, of course, no such leader in the American context, no possibility for intercession by a unifying figure. Nor is there pressure from below. Though popular, reconciliation with Iran is not a priority for a majority of U.S. citizens. There were no parallel celebrations in the streets last week, nor is there likely to be even if a final deal is reached in June.

Iran presents a curious case of a state constituted by a “sacred” ideology but whose ideology regularly provides cover for the profane politics of statecraft. Permanence and consistency have hardly been features of the Islamic Republic over its 36 years, as foreign and domestic policies have been refashioned, repeatedly, to serve the contingent interests of the revolution, not least of all by its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. Mehdi Bazargan once observed that Khomeini sought control of Iran in order to reach Islam. Khomeini reversed course in the final days of his life, declaring just months before his death in 1989 that the state “has priority over prayers, fasting, and haj” and that it was empowered to “unilaterally revoke any sharia agreement that it has conducted with the people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or of Islam,” even if it meant the suspension of the very pillars of Islam. With this single decree the state replaced the mosque as the “fortress” of Islam, forever.

As Texas A&M political scientist Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar explained to me, whereas the revolutionary state had once served the interests of Islam, Islam would now and forever serve the interests of the state. Internalized by then-President Khamenei, it is this edict that provides cover for the current supreme leader as he presses forward with the nuclear negotiations.

Understanding and accepting that hard-liners in Iran are motivated by social forces other than ideology or an unexamined hostility to the United States is an important step on the path to détente and provides a way forward to the sort of rapprochement now deemed to be improbable because of the hard line. It is true that for some, no deal will ever prove satisfactory. There is no conciliation possible with the likes of Hossein Shariatmadari, nor with his counterparts in the United States. But it is also true that for many so-called hard-liners, anti-Americanism constitutes — but does not transcend — a fundamental concern and love for their homeland. Iran has made deals with countries less pious and, in a strange way, less “Iranian” than the United States. There is far more ground for consensus than the difficulties of the past 36 years would indicate.

State authorities several years ago moved international flights from Mehrabad to Imam Khomeini International Airport. The new airport, like Iran’s nuclear industry, was originally proposed by the Shah’s regime, designed to present a more modern face to the world. Located in a rural province some 37 miles past the southern outskirts of Tehran, the great distance, combined with the late night arrival of international flights, have greatly diminished the ritual of going to airport in a large group. The old traditions of greeting returning travelers have become, as the Iranians say, kamrang, literally, they have “lost their color.”

Mehrabad too was once located on the outskirts of Tehran. As the city expanded westward, it enveloped the old airport completely, pulling it closer to the capital’s center. Its convenience keeps it in use for domestic flights as well as for diplomats returning from official business overseas, including the negotiating team recently returned from Switzerland. Mehrabad — whose name means “limitless love,” where on the first day of school in 1980 the Iraqi Air Force dropped the bombs that began the Iran-Iraq War, and where the 444-day ordeal came to an end for 52 American hostages — would be an apt setting for a gathering of Iranians, waiting at the terminal gates to welcome back old friends from the United States, to restore color to the relationships that have been lost.

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Iran’s grass-roots politics and the nuclear deal

By Mohammad Ali Kadivar, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Ali Honari, VU University Amsterdam

The recently agreed-upon nuclear framework between Iran and the P5+1 world powers is a great example of how grass-roots participation at the level of domestic politics can interact with important changes at the level of international politics. The nuclear breakthrough could not have happened without important developments that led to the election of Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013. If this agreement turns into a comprehensive deal by June 2015, it will have important ramifications for Iranian domestic politics.

Grass-roots activism was crucial for the results of the 2013 election in different ways. First, grass-roots pressures convinced reformist leaders to support a candidate in the election despite the disqualification of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was initially the first choice for the reformist camp. Second, grass-roots participants in the electoral campaigns of Rouhani and the other reformist candidate, Mohammad Reza Aref, pressured the two to make an alliance and stay in the election with a single candidate. Reformist backing was crucial for Rouhani’s electoral victory. According to polls before the election, Rouhani was a runner-up candidate until the day the reformist coalition headed by former president Mohammad Khatami endorsed him. After this endorsement, his support skyrocketed and continued until election day. Finally, the mass mobilization after the disputed election of 2009, later called the Green Movement, perhaps contributed to the rather clean voting process in 2013. The protest mobilization of 2009 signaled both the high costs of fraud as well as Iranian’s strong desire for a fair and free election. From this perspective, the rather healthy polling process in 2013 was a result of 2009’s large protest wave.

Rouhani’s victory had important effects on the conditions of civil society forces and democratic activists in Iran. True to promises in Rouhani’s electoral platform, the level of state repression, which had intensified since 2009, remarkably decreased after the election. After 2013, new newspapers with moderate or reformist orientation came into being. The policy of barring students from higher education because of their political activities ended due to diligent insistence from the new Ministry of Sciences. Accordingly, activists and politicians perceived that the level of repression had decreased and that they would therefore not be prosecuted for organizing private meetings. When reformist groups were able to have a public convention in January 2015 for the first time after six years, Khatami stated that under the new administration the context is more favorable for gatherings and activities of different groups and organizations. As such, there appears to be a greater frequency of public protest about issues such as violence against women, teachers’ salaries and air pollution.

Another important part of Rouhani’s electoral platform was addressing the nuclear dispute with the United States and European powers, lifting the sanctions and improving the economic conditions of the country. Rouhani’s administration immediately started the process of negotiations to reach an agreement with the P5+1 and successfully acquired the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for the negotiation process. The framework that Iran and the P5+1 have agreed upon – and potential comprehensive agreement, in turn – will have important effects on the condition of civil society forces in Iran.

First, the nuclear breakthrough seems to have revitalized hope and enthusiasm in achieving more political gains for the democratic forces. Recent scholarship about social movements stresses the importance of emotions, such as hope, in shaping the dynamics of participation and activism. The violent crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations of 2009 resulted in an atmosphere of disappointment and disillusion among advocates of democratic change about achieving victories either
through elections or contentious mobilization. The electoral victory of 2013 was an important event in bringing hope back to the camp of change-seekers, and the current nuclear breakthrough is another significant sequence. Celebrations in the streets of Iran’s capital city Tehran, as well as commentaries on social media and reformist newspapers, were full of hopeful reactions to the nuclear deal. The reformist Shargh newspaper, for example, published an op-ed with the title of “Hope in Days after Lifting Sanctions.” Etemad, another reformist paper, also described people’s reaction to the deal as the “Return of Hope.”

Second, while many journalists and social media users praised Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, for reaching a deal, a group of reformists interpreted the agreement as an outcome of the collective effort of supporters of democratic change and as a sign of their individual efficacy. A study of voters in the 2013 election suggests that the sense of individual efficacy played an important role in changing the decision of individuals from boycotting to participating. A statement released by a group of reformist activists after the recent nuclear agreement also described the agreement as the result of “insight and shrewdness of citizens who, despite all jails and prisons, all pressures and limitations, did not become hopeless, stayed in the field, and by stressing the necessity of dialogue between Iran and the US, helped to resuscitate hope and prudence instead of threat and fear.”

Third, some reformists have taken reaching a deal as a sign of the effectiveness of electoral politics in Iran. Whether electoral politics present an opportunity for democratization has been an ongoing debate within different factions of the democratic opposition in Iran since at least 2000. Such debates have considerably affected the alliances within the democratic movement since 1997. After the fraudulent election of 2009 and severe crackdown on the protesters, many Iranians concluded that participating in any elections in the Islamic Republic is just meaningless. On the other hand, the unexpected victory of Rouhani in 2013 was interpreted as evidence for the basic effectiveness of the electoral process. In this context, participants of 2013 election have perceived the nuclear agreement as further evidence for the effectiveness of elections in Iran, as illustrated in by Iranian social media users’ posts on outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. For example, one of these users pointed out that the “real victory” happened in June 2013.

Other users have connected the nuclear deal to the upcoming parliamentary election in February 2016. A prominent reformist activist wrote that the next round of the battle for political change would be the elections for both the parliamentary and the Assembly of Experts. Comments from other reformist activists and politicians also show that they perceive the nuclear breakthrough as a big boost for the victory of reformist and moderate alliance in the 2016 parliamentary election. Reformists appear to expect that this international success could give more leverage to Rouhani’s administration in domestic politics against hardliners and potentially open up space for reformists organizing around elections and collective action without direct political demands within civil society. While it does not seem likely that the Guardian Council will approve prominent reformist figures to run for the election, it is possible that moderate figures in the same vein as Rouhani – or less known reformist politicians – will be able to pass the filter of the Guardian Council.

While the democratic opposition within Iran still suffers from organizational weakness and the lack of a unifying long-term strategy, the nuclear breakthrough seems to have recharged the emotional battery of reformist activists and supporters and contributed to an optimistic perception about short-term electoral progress.

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Iran's political economy under and after the sanctions

By Kevan Harris, Princeton University

That new market smell is in the air. Tehran’s hotel ballrooms are filling up with visiting delegations of European and American investors who hear tea-fueled assurances of long-term profits before shuttling off to the tourist sights in Shiraz and Isfahan. The London-based asset management firm Charlemagne Capital recently announced a partnership with Iran’s Turquoise Partners, an equity fund that invests in the Tehran Stock Exchange. If Charlemagne is knocking at the door, what’s next? Alexander the Great LLC? As a nuclear deal with Iran moves closer to realization, foreign business is exploring how to cash in.

Yet all of this attention is not as new as we think. While sanctions most severely affected the economy after 2011, Iran’s neighbors in Asia never fully cut off economic ties, no matter how much U.S. arm-twisting occurred behind closed doors. Turkey and Iran recently implemented a tariff-reduction agreement to increase cross-border trade. Chinese cellphones pour over the border along with Pakistani cigarettes and Korean washing machines. Iraq’s southern cities are being reconstructed with Iranian steel and cement. The Emirati conglomerate Majid al-Futtain operates a garish hypermarket in Tehran’s western suburbs. During trips to Iran between 2011 and 2013, even with European capital flight, I’ve run into Indian petrochemical executives in Ahvaz, Chinese construction honchos in Yazd and Russian mining magnates in Tabriz.

Even with the cordon sanitaire of sanctions, then, Iran’s market autarky was overstated. One of the ironies of the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) was that the polarizing president opened the borders to consumer imports at the same time his government pumped unprecedented levels of cash into the economy. In 2006, my Turkish tailor in downtown Tehran asked me to bring a hard-to-get premium brand olive oil from Istanbul for his wife’s beauty routine. In 2011, I could pick up the same olive oil at any Tehran corner bodega. According to Iran’s Central Bank, the absolute value of imports of goods and services, controlling for inflation, rose every year from 2005 to 2011 and then finally began to shrink, but even in 2012/13 the total value was higher than a decade prior. This wasn’t necessarily healthy for the economy, however, and the giddy bubble of consumption and speculation made the ensuing crash and recession over the past three years all the more painful. Faced with expulsion from global financial markets, an embargo of oil exports and a run on the currency, the Ahmadinejad government countered international pressure with tactical bluster rather than coherent strategy, while his allies went to defeat at the polls.

As the government of President Hassan Rouhani is slowly sifting through the rubble as it negotiates for a lifting of sanctions, then, the Iranian economy still looks quite different today than it did 10 years ago. This transformation has been largely misunderstood. Contemporary portrayals of Iran’s economy fall into a rudimentary trap which social scientists are taught to recognize in the first year of graduate school: selecting on the dependent variable. U.S. analysts read, for instance, that Iran’s economy is controlled by the contracting arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the Seal of the Prophets Construction Headquarters, or the Office fund of Leader and Supreme Jurist Ali Khamenei. If one looks for particular activity in the Iranian economy linked to shady state organs, one can find it in spades. The problem occurs when one only looks for these activities and ignores everything else. The result is analysis via rumor mill and scholarship via scaremongering. State-linked funds in Iran, including ones connected to the IRGC or the military, are unquestionably part of the economic scene. Yet by selecting on the dependent variable – in Iran’s case, only searching for pre-determined actors in the economy and turning a blind eye to other actors – we miss out on the larger story.

Over the past 10 years, enormous chunks of ownership in Iran’s state-owned enterprises were transferred into what many Iranian economists refer to synonymously
as the “quasi-governmental” or “pseudo-private” sector. This large middle economic stratum is not under the steely hand of one monolithic organization sitting at the country’s commanding heights. Nor gripped by the inky tentacles of 10 organizations. Nor entangled in the spider web of 50 organizations. Since most analysis selects on the dependent variable, Iran scholars do not know exactly how many quasi-governmental funds, foundations, holding companies and investment groups exist in Iran, nor do we know their relative share in key economic sectors. As much as we may sympathize with the motives, we cannot get an accurate picture by simply repeating the accusations of opposition politicians or activists when claims about Iran’s complex economy are heatedly thrown around in electoral campaigns or journalistic jousting.

So what to do? Former deputy industry minister and reformist politician Mohsen Safai Farahani stated last summer that there are at least 120 such economic entities, which control in total around 50 percent of Iran’s gross domestic product. It is as good as guess as any, since there is no existing systematic study of Iran’s quasi-governmental sector. We know this sector greatly expanded in large part through the transfer and sale of state assets. At a very abstract level, we can see this shift using data provided by the Iranian Privatization Organization. As I document in a forthcoming book chapter, controlling for inflation, about 3.5 percent of the total value of state enterprise transfers occurred under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), 6 percent under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and a whopping 90.5 percent under President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). These shares hardly sold to the private sector at all. Instead, they mostly were transferred to the semi-governmental sector. But what does that really mean?

Our project is in the nascent stage, but preliminary results are telling. Many public sector companies were forced to put up large blocs of shares on the TSE during the Ahmadinejad government’s drive for “privatization.” Who bought them? Take Iran Khodro – the largest automaker in the country – which was required to sell off shares under the previous government. In 2013-2014, Iran Khodro’s main institutional shareholders – defined by the TSE as any entity that holds over 1 percent of company shares – included:

- Negar Nasr Investment Co., linked to the Basij Cooperative Fund
- The Civil Servant Pension Fund, a large investment company for state employee pension contributions
- The Industrial Development and Renovation Organization, a public conglomerate that pre-dates the 1979 revolution
- Mellat Bank, a major semi-public bank which an European Union court ruled in 2013 was unlinked to Iran’s nuclear enrichment program
- Tadbir Investment Co., linked to the Imam’s Order, a.k.a the Leader’s Office
- The Social Security Investment Company, a massive investment company for private and semi-public sector employee pension contributions
- Two private-sector investment firms
- Iran Khodro’s own investment company, Samand
This is just one example, albeit from an enormous corporation, but we are finding it to be a common pattern. Over the past decade, state transfer of Iran’s public sector companies seems to have been channeled toward organizations whose member constituencies had been produced alongside the state itself, whether large semi-public pension funds, cooperatives attached to “revolutionary” institutions like the IRGC, semi-public banks or holding companies fashioned by these very companies to protect their own stock and prevent ownership dilution.

Variants of this story have been present in many developing countries, from Japan’s “stakeholder” model of corporate governance in the 1960s, to chaebol business conglomerates in 1970s South Korea, to military investments in industrial zones during the 1980s in Turkey and to Brazil’s public pension fund capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s. If this is a major pattern in Iran’s ongoing economic transformation, then it may look messy and unproductive, but it is not distinctive to the Islamic Republic. Given the above, the implications of a nuclear deal for Iran’s political economy are twofold. First, it is unlikely that a single bloc of domestic economic ownership by itself is coherently organized enough to push Iran’s politics sharply in any direction. Second, the cross-cutting nature of inter-firm and intra-firm ownership means that foreign investment is going to have to negotiate with the hundreds of economic brokers in Iran’s semi-public sectors, not just powerpoint-wielding private entrepreneurs, in order to cash in on key markets.

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How Iranians are debating the nuclear deal

By Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, Texas A&M University

An intense public debate is unfolding in Iran over the details of the ongoing nuclear negotiations. For a country that has been largely deprived of informed, open and critical discussions on the merits of this costly program, this is highly unusual. Even more striking, it is the hardliners who are spearheading this dialogue in the run-up to the June 30 deadline for the final agreement.

In his first reaction to the Lausanne framework, Iran’s conservative Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged the authorities to invite criticism and enlighten “the people, particularly the elites” about the next steps. This invitation may seem to aim at shaping public opinion in Iran to bolster the country’s bargaining position, as some policy analysts argue. Political scientists might even view it as an example of audience cost theory. However, the main objective of these debates is the opposite. Instead of using the public to gain external credibility, the conservatives’ goal appears to be to ensure that the negotiations bring about elite cohesion and maintain the internal credibility and stability of the regime.

In a restless country where an election can split the elites and turn into an opposition movement, where a pop singer’s death can spontaneously attract large crowds and where even a preliminary nuclear agreement that may signal a possible end to some sanctions can become an impromptu street party, a final nuclear agreement, or lack
thereof, may dangerously polarize both the society and
the polity and foment instability. As a conservative senior
cleric recently warned, “the product of the negotiations
should not be a bipolar society.” In this climate,
maintaining societal and political cohesion supersedes the
nuclear negotiations, regardless of outcome. This unity
can be achieved and fortified through an orchestrated
public discourse that manages popular expectations and
reveals to the nation U.S. and European betrayal of Iranian
dreams.

Iranians from all walks of life anticipate a different outlook
after the final deal; from better laundry detergent and more
advanced medical technology to easy access to Western
visas and even swift social and political liberalization.
Popular sentiments are perhaps best captured by the jokes
that emerged soon after Lausanne.

What is more worrisome to the conservatives is that their
pragmatist rivals, who are leading the negotiations, are
determined to tap into and even heighten the popular
expectations for a possible nuclear agreement. Playing
along with much of the public’s optimism, President
Hassan Rouhani has maintained that the nuclear deal
is the first step to better relations with the international
community. This is a calculated move to link the
breakthrough in the negotiations to his 2013 election
and keep the moderate-conservative elites and public
onboard. More importantly, he hopes that this will induce
more flexibility on the terms of the agreement in return
for more substantial long-term gains. Hamid Aboutalebi
—a political adviser to Rouhani whose controversial
nomination to the U.N. ambassadorship was rejected by
the United States due to his alleged involvement in the
seizure of the U.S. Embassy in 1979—wrote unmistakably
on Twitter that there is a bigger prize behind the nuclear
negotiations: “The interactions between Iran and the US is
more valuable than the nuclear issue. We should not let it
pass easily.”

The fear among conservatives is not just that if the
pragmatists seal a deal they will be set to overwhelm the
upcoming elections for the Majles and the Assembly of
Experts – the body that chooses the next Supreme Leader
— in 2016. Beyond factional politics, conservatives are
concerned that the framework could lock Iran into an
irreversible position limiting its nuclear activities together
with providing exceptional access to sensitive sites,
including military installations. In return, according to the
American fact sheet, the nuclear related sanctions will be
suspended, not lifted, and only gradually, not all at once.

Under these circumstances and given the ongoing
jubilation in Iran, accepting the deal could weaken the
regime from outside, while rejecting it could lead to
social unrest and potential implosion. This seemingly
led Khamenei to remain silent for a week after the
Lausanne framework only to add more uncertainty to the
preliminary agreement in an April 9 statement “I neither
agree nor disagree . . . Everything done so far neither
guarantees an agreement in principle nor its contents,
nor does it guarantee that the negotiations will continue
to the end.” Instead, Khamenei pressed the Rouhani
administration not to sideline the opponents of the deal,
rather to cultivate a debate to inform the elites of the
potential defects in the final agreement. This would either
guarantee a good deal or ensure a united country in case
of a failed deal. Additionally, this would give more credit to
the conservatives for “helping” the pragmatists to secure a
better deal and assist them to avoid blame if the deal fails
to materialize. Thus, both the regime and the conservatives
within it will benefit from an open national debate on the
country’s most challenging issue, so the calculation goes.

As always, Iran’s conservative media is ahead of what the
leadership publicly utters. Since the negotiations began
in 2013, and particularly after Lausanne, conservative
commentators and nuclear experts have been analyzing the
declarations, statements, interviews and fact sheets from
all parties involved in the negotiations in order to reveal
their discrepancies and Western treachery behind them.
They bring English dictionaries and compare these texts
word by word to show that “suspension” indeed means
“suspension,” not “termination” as Iran’s Foreign Minister
Mohammad Javad Zarif claims. Critics point to the heated
Iran debate in Washington, particularly on Capitol Hill, to
demonstrate that the nuclear deal will never reduce U.S. pressure on the Islamic Republic.

Zarif struggles to defend a preliminary agreement without divulging the details and resist the call by 213 out of 290 members of the parliament to release the “Iranian fact sheet.” The final agreement can plausibly include elements absent in current framework. For instance, the previous Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) signed by Iran and the P5+1 in November 2013 did not explicitly recognize Iran’s right to enrich uranium. U.S. officials, including President Obama, stressed that the JPOA did not “grant Iran a right to enrich.” Even Khamenei reportedly expressed doubts at Rouhani’s and Zarif’s claims: “I am a jurist myself. I have read this [JPOA] text three time and I still do not see the right to enrich uranium coming out of it.” However, now both the Lausanne framework and even the U.S. fact sheet practically recognize Iran’s enrichment program, but under extraordinary constraints and intrusive inspections.

At this point again, Zarif wishes to escape public debate and keep the negotiations in secret until the final agreement in June. But the conservatives fear that by then the foreign minister may have signed a fundamentally flawed deal. In commentaries and televised debates, they blame Zarif for not properly capitalizing on Iran’s regional ascension and “success” in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. “I wish the nuclear negotiation room had one window: a window that would open to San’a, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad,” lamented a former negotiator. Putting the pragmatists on a defensive position, conservative critics even argue that it is better to give up the entire enrichment program than let the Western spies penetrate the country in the name of nuclear inspectors.

Khamenei’s insistence that he never interferes in the “details” of the negotiations added further credence to these concerns, even though his general support has given the opposite impression. For the past 12 years, he has consistently backed the Iranian negotiators publicly, while preserving the right to criticize their compromises later. This ambiguous posture has led many observers to make two contradictory conclusions: Either Khamenei hopes the negotiations fail before he can remove the pragmatists, or he is desperate for a deal that would lift the paralyzing sanctions. Both of these views miss the two-level game being played here. Khamenei has to juggle between regime security and his institutional interests within the regime. He needs a good deal, provided that it serves both the regime and his conservative grip on power. Otherwise, he would prefer a no deal or another extension, as he recently signaled.

Regime security and factional interests do not always align. But so far, Khamenei has proved to be an astute politician who maintains the right balance between security and factional interests even after grave blunders. In 2013, in what is a classic case of authoritarian durability, he skillfully used the presidential elections to partially mend the perilous rift that emerged in the aftermath of 2009 elections within the elites and between the state and the society. By accepting Rouhani’s candidacy and victory, he won back many disgruntled clerical, political, military and social elites and brought millions of resentful voters behind the polity. To be sure, the ascendance of a candidate who was not perceived as Khamenei’s choice temporarily undermined the supreme leader’s position, but it strengthened the regime’s overall legitimacy. Since then, Khamenei has recovered his factional loss, partly thanks to regional developments. Iranian conservatives boast that the leader’s prudence and resistance paid off, as Iran is now a dominant power in the Middle East, controlling four capitals in the Arab world. The survival of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was particularly critical in changing the domestic balance of power in Khamenei’s favor. The recent selection of conservative Mohammad Yazdi to head the Assembly of Experts after his startling defeat of Rouhani’s mentor, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, is the latest evidence of this factional recovery.

Now, in order to gain more credibility for the regime and himself, Khamenei is encouraging the mass media, the universities and other forums to openly foster a national nuclear dialogue. This deliberate debate could reveal, he hopes, that no matter how many concessions Iran makes, the United States will cheat and renege on its promises.
and impose new sanctions on Iran under new pretexts, instead of removing the old ones. For Khamenei, this could be a fruitful educational process for the elites and the hopeful masses to finally see what he has described as the Americans’ hypocrisy and animosity, and the Iranian pragmatists’ naivety and timidity.

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Iran’s conservative consensus on the nuclear deal

By Farzan Sabet, Graduate Institute, Geneva and Georgetown University

Explanations of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s decision to come to the negotiation table and conclude a nuclear deal often emphasize the will of Iranian voters and the election of Hassan Rouhani as president. These explanations ignore two equally important factors behind both Rouhani’s election and the decision to negotiate: Disunity among Iranian conservatives and intra-factional consensus politics in Iran. Understanding these factors is crucial to making sense of Iran’s decision to negotiate and evaluating claims about what a final nuclear deal could mean in the Iranian domestic political context.

Rouhani won the 2013 Iranian presidential election on a campaign platform that included foreign policy promises to end the nuclear crisis and lift economic sanctions, as well as domestic promises to expand social and political freedoms. However, the role of political schisms among Iranian conservatives in Rouhani’s victory has been largely ignored in Iran analysts’ observations. Especially after the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election, many traditional conservatives began taking issue with the form and substance of the policies of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his hard-line conservative allies.

The nuclear issue was one source of tension between traditional and hard-line conservatives, with the former pushing for its resolution through negotiations in order to lift sanctions while the latter advocated continued confrontation. By the 2013 election campaigns, these tensions had led to divisions among conservatives, contributing to their inability to unite around one or even two strong candidates. The decision of traditional conservatives to break with hard-line conservatives on the nuclear issue in the lead up to the election eased Rouhani’s path to office. As the election neared but the conservative field failed to narrow, Rouhani managed to mobilize both centrist and reformist elites and voters behind his campaign in the final days before the election to eke out the narrowest victory in Iranian presidential history.

Traditional conservatives also enabled the opening that has allowed the recent political framework agreement. As Aaron Stein and I argued in May 2014, the Islamic Republic’s main political currents have come to a broad if delicate consensus to undertake nuclear negotiations with the United States for some time now, perhaps as early as March 2013 when the United States and Iran created the secret back-channel talks in Oman. This consensus appears to continue to hold as both sides concluded a political framework agreement in April 2015 that could be the basis of a final agreement.
So, just who are these traditional conservatives who have been so important to both Rouhani’s ascension and nuclear negotiations? While Tehranology is fraught with perils, taxonomies of key Iranian political currents often divide them into four categories forming two broad camps: reformists and centrists, who together form the “moderate” camp, and traditional and hard-line conservatives, who constitute the conservative “principalist” camp. Iran’s political system is not based on the type of party politics that have characterized many Western liberal democracies. Instead, Iran has political currents based on shifting alliances between important political figures, centers of power and key constituencies.

Most analyses of Iranian politics from outside the country focus on the fluently English-speaking and photogenic centrists and reformists on one hand and the bearded and bombastic hard-line conservatives on the other. However, for some time now the center of gravity in Iranian politics has shifted to traditional conservatives, whose most visible bases include the Shiite clergy and traditional mercantile class (bazaar). Some of the most well-known traditional conservatives include Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, Chief Justice Sadegh Larijani and Center for Strategic Research head and former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati. They exercise deep influence over many of the country’s most important centers of power, including the Office of the Supreme Leader, the judiciary, Council of Guardians, parliament and Assembly of Experts. By siding with centrists and reformists or hard-line conservatives as their ideology and interests dictate, they have the power to make or break consensuses on a wide range of policy issues.

While traditional conservatives continue to support Rouhani’s nuclear diplomacy and the goal of lifting sanctions, no similar consensus exists on the Iranian president’s promise to expand domestic social and political freedoms. Iran’s executive branch certainly has varying degrees of discretion in domestic and foreign policy making and some authority to expand social and political freedoms on its own, as Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Ali Honari recently indicated. But large policy changes today require buy-in from traditional conservatives, and at least when it comes to social and political freedoms, the Rouhani administration is confronted with a largely united conservative current that prefers the status-quo. For this reason, we should limit our expectations of what the Rouhani administration can achieve in the short-term on domestic social and political freedoms, even with a nuclear deal, unless it can reach a new consensus with traditional conservatives. But as events since Rouhani’s August 2013 inauguration illustrate, we should not hold our breath.

The fate of Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and Zahra Rahnavard, who have remained under house arrest without trial since 2011, is one example why. No steps have been taken to end their state of limbo, with all signs pointing to this state of affairs continuing. As public debate on the Green Movement leaders fate heated up following Rouhani’s election, the Office of the Supreme Leader released an infographic that declared their actions during the post-election crisis as “unpardonable.” Ali Motahari, a maverick conservative sympathetic to the Green Movement leaders’ plight, asked Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei about their fate in a private meeting, and quoted the latter as responding: “Their crime is big, and if the Imam [Khomeini] was here he would confront [them] more intensely. If they are prosecuted their sentence will be very heavy and you will definitely not be satisfied. Until now we have been merciful toward them.”

A fourth Green Movement leader, prominent reformist and former president Mohammad Khatami is now the subject of a media ban by the judiciary, which states that “…media outlets do not have the right to publish or transfer images or content on him. This order continues to be in effect and if an outlet acts against it they shall be confronted.”

The case of former minister of science, research and technology Reza Faraji Dana is also telling. Rouhani has given a more prominent role to reformists in this ministerial portfolio to end corruption and Ahmadinejad-era policies that have been harmful to students and faculty.
Not long after his appointment Faraji Dana, a respected former president of the University of Tehran, became one of the few ministers in the Islamic Republic’s history to be impeached. This was carried out by the same traditional conservative-dominated parliament that has largely supported the president’s nuclear diplomacy, as Paasha Mahdavi has also noted recently.

In another key elected center of power, the Assembly of Experts, a centrist candidate more open to expanding social and political freedoms lost a leadership race in this past March. The Assembly of Experts is an elected clerical body responsible for selecting, monitoring and removing the supreme leader. Elder statesman and former two-term president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani lost the internal race for leadership of the body to the traditional conservative Mohammad Yazdi by a two-to-one margin.

Some have suggested that a nuclear agreement could give Rouhani and his allies momentum in the lead up to the 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. This ignores the filtering role that the conservative-dominated Council of Guardians has historically played and will likely again play. The council is a quasi-judicial quasi-electoral body that plays a multiplicity of roles within Iran’s political system. Its functions include vetting candidates for presidential, parliamentary and Assembly of Expert elections, as well as overseeing elections. Its leaders have expressed vigilance ahead of the 2016 vote about the types of candidates who may try to enter the parliament and Assembly of Experts — and may will disqualify candidates viewed as being sympathetic to Rouhani’s domestic agenda.

All of this is certainly not to suggest that a nuclear deal would have zero dividends for the Iranian president to use on the domestic front. Rouhani’s success in finalizing a deal in 2015 could boost his credibility as a strong leader among elites across Iran’s political spectrum, enabling him to forge new consensuses on a wide variety of domestic policy issues. It could also energize his voter base to turn out in large numbers for the 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. A more Rouhani-friendly parliament could aid the Iranian president by precluding defeats like the Faraji Dana affair, while a Rouhani-friendly Assembly of Experts could select the next supreme leader to be more amenable to expanding social and political freedoms.

The Iranian people are certainly active agents in forging their own destiny and the political destiny of their country, whether through elections or social and political activism. However, we – as analysts and scholars – ignore the importance of elite consensus politics in the Islamic Republic at our own peril. This is doubly true for the traditional conservatives who have for the moment become the consensus makers in Iranian politics but often remain unnoticed.

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Understanding Iran’s supreme leader on the nuclear deal

By Eric Lob, Florida International University and Amir Hossein Mahdavi, Brandeis University

On April 9, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered a speech in response to the framework agreement between the P5+1 and Iran that seeks to curtail the latter’s nuclear program. In his speech, Khamenei took a neutral stance on the framework agreement, stating that he “neither agreed nor disagreed because nothing has happened yet.” Khamenei also expressed pessimism over a final deal and reiterated his distrust of the United States. For many outside observers, his comments signaled that the nuclear deal was doomed.

Aside from the possibility that Khamenei may not want to show his hand before a final deal is concluded, what factors explain his rhetorical ambiguity, pessimism and distrust – and should we take him at his word?

The starting point for interpreting Khamenei’s ambiguous intervention is twofold: First, politicians – Khamenei not excluded – often issue statements for public consumption to conceal, yet advance a deeper agenda comprising a number of strategic calculations, personal motivations and policy goals. Second, as in the United States and elsewhere, official rhetoric should not be taken at face value, but rather analyzed through the lens of factional politics.

Khamenei has tacitly supported the framework agreement because he seeks an outright lifting of the economic sanctions. Since 2013, he has subtly backed President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in their negotiations with the P5+1. During the past two years, Khamenei has been kept apprised of all the details. The framework agreement in Lausanne would not have come to fruition without his consent.

Khamenei’s motivations have been clearly articulated from within his carefully hedged language. In his statements, Khamenei has repeatedly tied the outcome of a final agreement to sanctions being “lifted completely and at once.” Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, who previously opposed the negotiations, has gone one step further. Two days before Khamenei’s speech, Jafari fully supported the framework agreement on the condition that it fully recognized Iran’s right to enrich uranium for scientific research and energy purposes. Like Khamenei, Jafari insisted that a final agreement should lead to an outright lifting of the sanctions. Jafari’s statements run counter to the expectations of many analysts outside of Iran. Analysts expected the IRGC to oppose the agreement on the grounds that increased international tension and economic sanctions have paved the way for greater, internal securitization and a more robust and profitable, informal economy – to the benefit of the IRGC.

Khamenei endeavors to lift the sanctions for economic and political reasons. Since the collapse of nuclear negotiations between the United States and Iran in 2003, Iran has expanded its nuclear capabilities. In response, the United States and international community have imposed harsher sanctions on Iran. These sanctions have hurt the Iranian economy by curbing GDP growth to -5.8 percent and increasing inflation and unemployment to 35.2 percent and 20 percent respectively in 2013. Compounding these economic woes, Iran’s budgetary resources have been strained due to sagging global oil prices and the state’s continued provision of financial and military assistance to its allies and proxies during protracted conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

From the standpoint of domestic politics, Khamenei seeks sanctions relief to make the country easier to manage leading up to elections in 2016 for the parliament and Assembly of Experts, a publicly-elected council made up of over 80 members, who are responsible for electing, overseeing and, if necessary, dismissing the supreme leader. The elections for the Assembly of Experts will be particularly critical and contentious because they will determine Khamenei’s successor or the next supreme
leader. Khamenei’s political calculus is that higher public satisfaction with an improved economy and closer ties with the Europe and the United States will give his conservative allies in the Guardian Council the flexibility to approve the most loyal candidates.

Though he tacitly supports the nuclear negotiations, Khamenei publicly maintains a neutral stance on the framework agreement while remaining pessimistic of a final agreement and distrustful of the United States for three reasons. First, as he has repeatedly stated since the signing of the Geneva interim agreement in 2013, Khamenei is unwilling to relinquish Iran’s anti-American and anti-imperialist ideology and identity. Over the last 36 years, this ideology and identity – which emphasizes national independence and resistance against foreign interference – has constituted Iran’s raison d’être. This ideology and identity enables Iran to maintain legitimacy among constituents at home and garner support in other parts of the Muslim and developing world. Quietly allowing the Rouhani government to reach an agreement while overtly condemning the United States enables Khamenei to strike an ideological balance while outflanking more extremist elements in government and society.

Second, by appearing ambivalent and not giving the framework agreement a ringing endorsement, Khamenei seeks to prevent Rouhani and Zarif from scoring a decisive, political victory at home before upcoming elections. In a negative yet gentle tone, Khamenei loyalists – notably the managing editor of Kayhan newspaper, Hossein Shariatmadari, who is appointed by the supreme leader – have criticized Rouhani and Zarif for granting too many concessions to the West. Rouhani and Zarif, who are aligned with the moderate and reformist camp, advocate the easing of political and social restrictions – goals that conflict with Khamenei’s agenda. The moderates and reformists believe in strengthening Iran’s elective institutions over its so-called theocratic and non-elective ones, which are controlled by Khamenei and his conservative allies. In addition to alleviating economic sanctions and international isolation, Rouhani campaigned in 2013 on a pledge to release political prisoners and improve rights for all citizens – a policy the conservatives have been hard-pressed to endorse, yet one that would further mitigate popular discontent before the 2016 elections.

Third, Khamenei intentionally maintains an ambiguous posture to pacify the framework agreement’s staunchest critics: the hard-liners from Jebhe-ye Paydari (Resistance Front). The Paydari Front is composed of right-wing cleric and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his cabinet ministers, former nuclear negotiator and recent presidential candidate Saeed Jalili, and current parliamentarians and members of the paramilitary Basij, which is under the purview of the IRGC. Since the announcement of the framework agreement, parliamentarians from the Paydari Front have quarreled with Zarif.

Khamenei and other conservatives in the government and IRGC do not want the Paydari Front to completely undermine a final agreement that would bolster the Iranian economy and ostensibly render the country more manageable during upcoming elections. At the same time, Khamenei and the conservatives have not restrained the Paydari Front for three reasons. First, Rouhani and Zarif can leverage the hard-liners to make tougher demands and extract greater concessions from the P5+1. The American negotiators have adopted a similar strategy by leveraging hawkish congressional representatives, right-wing Israeli officials and recalcitrant Arab monarchs in the talks.

Moreover, for Khamenei and the conservatives, the hard-liners represent an effective counterweight against the political ambitions of the moderate and reformist bloc. In contrast to the latter, the Paydari Front believes in the continuation of the Guardianship of the Jurist – the idea that the government should be ruled by a leading jurist or supreme leader – and the supremacy of non-elective institutions over elective ones. This worldview is in line with Khamenei’s goals as he prepares to reconstitute the Assembly of Experts and determine his successor.
Finally, Khamenei has not publicly endorsed the framework agreement and overtly maintains an anti-American posture because these goals and values correspond to those of the Paydari Front, which has politically and financially benefitted from international tensions and economic sanctions. If Khamenei goes too far in openly supporting the agreement and advocating rapprochement with the United States, he runs the risk of alienating the hard-liners and their constituents. He also risks inviting mutiny and sedition from hard-liners within the political and security establishment during such a sensitive and uncertain time. In the end, Khamenei's ambiguous posture is as much a reflection of his conflicting priorities as it is an attempt to delicately balance competing factions in an effort to strengthen and preserve his own legitimacy and power.

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Will Iran’s parliament block the nuclear deal?

By Paasha Mahdavi, University of California, Los Angeles

On the eve of the announcement of an agreement over the Iranian nuclear program, conservative members of Iran’s parliament pointedly reminded President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif that any deal would have to be ratified by parliament before becoming policy. In the days since the Lausanne agreement, some members of parliament (MPs) have kept their feet on the gas pedal in attacking and criticizing the deal and its legitimacy within domestic policy. Some MPs have been quite specific in identifying weaknesses of the deal in terms of the exact number of centrifuges Iran is allowed to maintain. Still others have lambasted the entire agreement as “unacceptable” and merely Western propaganda.

So is Iran’s parliament a major obstacle to a nuclear deal in June? Not quite. Instead of intentionally blocking any international engagement, parliament is playing the role of “public defender.” MPs are vocalizing their constituents’ concerns about the fairness of the deal, whether it will ultimately improve the economy and how Iran will be perceived in the international community.

Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Ali Honari recently argued that grass-roots participation and domestic politics were crucial in getting this deal off the ground. Iran’s parliament represents another critical domestic political factor – and potentially a blocking one in the negotiation endgame. Iran’s parliament, as my research has shown in other contexts, plays a more important role than is widely understood. Aside from the presidency, parliament is the other channel through which Iran’s citizens have a voice in domestic and international politics – when it is not overruled by unelected supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, that is.

This matters for the Iran deal because Iran’s current parliament is a markedly conservative one. Whereas the electorate’s choice of Rouhani in the 2013 presidential election is largely seen as an endorsement of engaging the international community to resolve the nuclear issue,
the parliamentary elections of 2012 gave off an entirely different message. Roughly 200 of the 290 parliamentary seats in that election were won by members of the conservative “principalists” – many of whom have close ties to Khamenei, the ultimate veto-player. This forecasted a bleak outlook for those in favor of rapprochement with the United States and Europe. Indeed, voters and politicians who fall into the pro-foreign-engagement “reformist” faction largely boycotted the election to protest the civil society fallout from the 2009 presidential election and the imprisonment of members of political opposition groups.

This conservative parliament has not thus far acted to torpedo the nuclear talks, however. In spite of parliament’s conservative swing, MPs confirmed Rouhani’s appointment of Zarif – sometimes referred to as Washington’s favorite Iranian – as foreign minister in August 2013. Nor did parliament block the president’s decision in September 2013 to shift negotiating authority from the Supreme National Security Council to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thereby making Zarif the top negotiator. Moreover, in early 2015, Zarif’s pro-engagement policy was initially approved by parliament. After a grueling parliamentary session allowing Zarif to advocate and to seek approval for his negotiating strategy and concessions, Iran’s MPs voted 125 to 86 in favor of his plan, with 79 abstentions.

The overwhelming majority of conservative members still makes parliament a potentially major obstacle to a nuclear deal. The months leading up to the Lausanne negotiations saw countless bombastic speeches by conservative MPs and attempts to stop the negotiations before the March deadline set by Zarif and the P5+1 negotiating team. In particular, the anti-reformist Resistance Front (Jebhe-ye Paydari) faction, led by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, took every opportunity to dismantle and discredit negotiations. In February 2015, 173 MPs voted in favor of a motion supported by the Resistance Front that would have forced the government to cancel the November 2013 Geneva “interim deal” and resume all previous enrichment activity. No damage was done to the negotiating process, however, as the motion failed to become law in subsequent sessions. Again in March, days before the negotiating team was set to meet again in Lausanne, 260 MPs issued a statement that any deal not including the full removal of sanctions and closure of the nuclear issue at the U.N. Security Council would be “null and void.” The MPs added that the country should “resume enriching uranium to the level needed in case the possible agreement is violated by the other side.”

Despite these outbursts, the majority of MPs are satisfied with the deal (notwithstanding a few amendments). Yes, the Resistance Front remains, well, resistant to the deal. But what has become an increasing trend since 2012 is the fractionalization of the conservative camp into several moderate-leaning factions, especially when it comes to the nuclear issue. These groups, notably Speaker Ali Larijani’s United Front (Jebhe-ye Muttahid-e Usulgarayan) and “moderate principalists” such as former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaie (himself not a member of parliament), have praised the nuclear negotiating team and its outcome.

This stance roughly accords with Iranian public opinion, as best we can determine it through surveys. A survey of Iranian voters conducted in the summer by the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland and the University of Tehran Center for Public Opinion Research (UTCPOR) shows that while nearly all respondents support the negotiations, about 49 percent support restrictions on uranium stockpiles and only 24 percent would be willing to concede dismantling of centrifuges. A more recent UTCPOR survey from October 2014 found that, again despite nearly unanimous support for a deal, only 18 percent of respondents would agree to any deal that would “roll back” Iran’s nuclear achievements. And when it comes to the “rewards” of a deal, many remain skeptical: nearly 75 percent did not believe that the United States would lift sanctions following any nuclear deal.

Given the complexity of voters’ preferences over the nuclear deal, it is not unexpected that MPs continue to pressure Rouhani, Zarif and the nuclear negotiating team. Beyond representing their constituents, the role of MPs in
these negotiations, however indirect, is also about saving face. This helps to explain the reciprocal provocations in the days since the deal. For example, the United States published a factsheet on Iran after the deal; MPs pressed Zarif to respond with a factsheet of their own. Europe wanted to add new sanctions; MPs held a closed session to ensure the deal includes a complete removal of sanctions (a concern echoed by Rouhani and Khamenei).

This should not be a surprise. As I have pointed out in my own research on Iran's parliament, Iranian MPs are held highly accountable to their voters despite operating within a political system of electoral authoritarianism. They face an incredibly uphill challenge in re-election every four years, with only 30 percent of incumbents able to maintain their seats (compare that to over 90 percent in the U.S. House of Representatives). It is this same cautiously optimistic yet skeptical electorate that MPs must appeal to in the February 2016 parliamentary elections. With that in mind, it's not surprising to hear MPs on the pulpit sometimes denouncing and other times praising Zarif's diplomatic achievement. This electoral incentive may help to explain why the parliament’s behavior so closely tracks public opinion – in contrast to the United States, one might add, where U.S. voters overwhelmingly favor a nuclear deal with Iran but their representatives have quite vocally denounced it. As Shervin Malekzadeh recently suggested, this is one of the “great ironies” to come out of the negotiating process.

On the whole, there is broad public support for the deal within Iran. The foreign minister’s compromises in Lausanne are backed not only by the Iranian people but by their legislative representatives as well. If voters maintain their support for a “fair” deal between now and June, it won’t be parliament that blocks it. And for those MPs that continue to criticize the negotiations – and in doing so condemn Rouhani’s (and implicitly Khamenei’s) foreign policy – it will be interesting to see if they keep their seats come February.

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If you really want to bomb Iran, take the deal

By Austin Long, Columbia University

Iran hawks are already out in force denouncing the announced nuclear deal between the United States and Iran. They worry that it takes the military option off the table. But the reality is just the opposite – anyone who supports the United States bombing Iran are well advised to jump on this deal.

I have spent a large portion of the past decade assessing military options against Iran’s program and the costs, benefits and likely consequences of the use of force. I have previously argued that any attack must answer the question of the end game: what is the long-term outcome of military force? Taking this deal, if it is implemented as currently outlined, not only increases the benefits and reduces the costs of military action should Iran attempt breakout, it also helps answer the end game question.

There are three main ways the deal improves the benefits of potential military action. First, one of the main objections to using force is that after Iran is bombed it can reconstitute its program, primarily by building new centrifuges for enrichment. Critics of force often argue Iran could reconstitute quickly because the United States lacks detailed knowledge of the supply chain that would allow Iran to build new centrifuges.

The deal very specifically addresses this objection in multiple points. It calls for inspectors to continuously monitor Iran’s supply chain, emphasizing “Iran’s centrifuge manufacturing base will be frozen and under continuous surveillance.” Further, Iran will only be allowed to procure nuclear components through a transparent and dedicated procurement channel. From an intelligence perspective this as an unparalleled opportunity to collect, analyze and develop targeting databases on this crucial element of Iran’s ability to reconstitute its nuclear program.

A bombing campaign that effectively destroyed the centrifuge manufacturing base would cripple Iran’s ability to reconstitute for years, perhaps even a decade or more. This opportunity alone should make Iran hawks gleeful.

Second, the deal forces Iran to concentrate the bulk of its centrifuges in the Natanz enrichment facility and to drastically curtail its stockpile of low enriched uranium. Natanz, though buried, is much more vulnerable to U.S. “bunker-buster” bombs than the much more deeply buried Fordo facility. This ensures that if the United States does strike, it can rapidly and with high confidence destroy the vast bulk of Iran’s centrifuges, leaving just over 1,000 available in Fordo. Fordo would be more difficult to destroy, but with only a relative handful of centrifuges and a very limited supply of low enriched uranium, Iran’s breakout timeline would be lengthy. This would give the United States ample time to pound away at the facility with weapons such as the 30,000-pound Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP).

Third, the deal significantly increases the scope and scale of inspections. This helps ensure that Iran cannot achieve a breakout undetected – so-called “sneak out” – either in its declared facilities or in clandestine facilities. This caveat also generally expands the U.S. intelligence community’s understanding of the nuclear program and decision-making surrounding it. Even if Iran seeks to thwart some inspections, the patterns revealed can help the intelligence community unravel Iranian deception practices as well as focus scarce intelligence collection on those areas where the Iranians are most evasive. This all helps improve targeting for military action.

In addition to increasing benefits of military options, the deal can reduce costs of action. One of the main costs of military action now is that it could cause the current sanctions regime to collapse, as a U.S. (or Israeli) strike would be seen as an act of unprovoked preventive war. The collapse of sanctions could benefit Iran immensely, particularly in terms of reconstituting its nuclear program. In contrast, if Iran is seen to be violating the deal through
attempted breakout, sanctions are to be rapidly reinstated. In this case, military action would not be seen as a decision to give up on diplomacy. Instead, it would be seen as a response to Iranian violations of a diplomatic deal that already had the blessing of the United Nations. Indeed it might even be possible to get a U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran’s program in this context. Admittedly, given the Russian and Chinese vetoes it is unlikely. Thus the deal may be the only way to have internationally supported sanctions and the effective use of force simultaneously.

It is this combination that helps answer the end game question. If Iran is widely seen to be violating such a hard won (and relatively generous) deal by attempting breakout, the use of force can lead to an outcome that is catastrophic for Iran. Not only would Iran’s entire nuclear infrastructure, built over decades, be demolished but it could be diplomatically and economically more isolated than it is now. In this end game the balance of power in the Middle East would shift significantly against Iran and the regime could face significant unrest after having gambled and lost. This prospect should warm the heart of even the most hawkish.

Those in Congress skeptical of the deal can help ensure that it does improve the benefits of military action. Tying acceptance of the deal to an expansion of intelligence collection, analysis and target development on the Iranian nuclear program would go a long way to achieving this. For the Obama administration, even another $1 billion a year for these programs would probably be a small price to pay for getting the deal. For those who hope a Republican president might use force after 2016, such an agreement on accepting the deal would ensure that the military option would be much more effective. A rare win for both Iran hawks and doves could be at hand.

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Why the Iran deal is a logical extension of U.S. nonproliferation policy

By Nick Miller, Brown University and Or Rabinowitz, Tel Aviv University

If Iran and the P5+1 are ultimately able to reach a deal along the lines of the recent framework agreement concluded in Lausanne, will this reinforce or undercut U.S. nonproliferation policy? Unsurprisingly, advocates and opponents of the framework tend to disagree on this question. Advocates argue that a deal would reduce the odds of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and therefore be a major nonproliferation achievement, while opponents argue that allowing Iran to maintain any enrichment capability leaves them too close to a bomb and contradicts the longstanding U.S. opposition to the spread of sensitive nuclear technologies.

Opponents are right to note that permitting Iran to maintain a significant enrichment capacity is contrary to U.S. nonproliferation policies. But this misses the point: Iran already has this capability, the United States has failed to prevent it despite its best efforts, and the question now is what to do about it. This is not the first time the United States has faced such a situation. Even after nonproliferation became a major priority in the mid-1960s, the United States has often found itself in a position
where its most ambitious nonproliferation efforts have failed. More often than not, instead of using military force against the nuclear upstart or making unrealistic demands that the country surrender all of its nuclear capabilities, the U.S. government has elected to broker pragmatic deals to restrict a country’s nuclear program and thereby limit the damage to the nonproliferation regime.

As we document in a forthcoming article in International Security, after the United States tried and failed to prevent Israel, South Africa and Pakistan from acquiring the capability to construct nuclear weapons, they brokered deals to prevent nuclear tests, weaponization and/or public declaration of weapons capabilities. Some scholars and commentators have interpreted these deals as the United States making exceptions to its nonproliferation policy and/or looking the other way, much like opponents of the Iran nuclear deal argue today. Yet, these deals are a logical and pragmatic part of a functioning nonproliferation policy: Once the most ambitious objectives are no longer possible, a second-best alternative is sought. Put differently, nonproliferation policy does not stop when a country acquires the technical capability to construct a nuclear device, or even when a country has assembled a handful of bombs. A pragmatist would try to limit proliferation even after these milestones have been reached.

In particular, some U.S. policymakers have believed that preventing tests, weaponization and public declaration would lessen pressures for reactive proliferation or nuclear “domino effects” and thereby reinforce rather than undercut nonproliferation policy. Even after North Korea likely acquired its first significant amounts of fissile material in the early 1990s, the United States did not demand the immediate handover of existing stockpiles; it brokered an agreement in 1994 whereby North Korea agreed to freeze its program at its current status and eventually dismantle its facilities in exchange for light water reactors from the United States. In 2007 this was repeated when the agreement reached with Pyongyang did not include the country handing over its plutonium stockpile. While the deals with North Korea and Pakistan ultimately broke down, it is worth noting that in none of these cases – Israel, South Africa, Pakistan or North Korea – did a tipping point of nuclear acquisition occur following the deals with the United States.

What are the implications of this historical pattern for the current framework agreement with Iran? First, the United States is not – nor has it ever been – omnipotent in the realm of nonproliferation. It is not an almighty hegemon able to strong-arm all other actors to accept its conditions. Whether due to conflicting geopolitical priorities or a lack of leverage over nuclear aspirants, the United States has often been forced to come to terms with less than optimal nonproliferation outcomes. In these circumstances, U.S. policymakers have generally realized that “the perfect is the enemy of the good” and that pursuing unrealistic objectives makes less sense than reaching a reasonable compromise.

Second, the proposed deal with Iran is not exceptional. In this vein, it is instructive to note that the United States has permitted Japan, Germany, Brazil and other non-nuclear weapons states to maintain enrichment or reprocessing capabilities. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), as a legal instrument, allows member states to levitate on the threshold of nuclear weapons capabilities, and if anything, the deal with Iran is more restrictive than historical examples, not less.

Third, if history is any guide, a deal with Iran would not result in the proliferation cascades that are currently predicted by opponents of the deal. Limiting Iranian nuclear capabilities short of a bomb will most likely reduce the incentives for neighboring states to acquire nuclear weapons. Moreover, even if these states do consider going down the nuclear path, they will face strong opposition from the United States that will significantly complicate their endeavors.

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Why U.S. intelligence is right about Iran

By Joshua Rovner, Southern Methodist University

In 2002, the intelligence community produced a flawed estimate of Iraq’s nuclear, biological and chemical weapons capabilities. Intelligence analysts had very little reliable information at their disposal, especially because weapons inspectors had been out of the country for several years. Making matters worse, the George W. Bush administration began to lean on the community to exaggerate the Iraqi threat, and it used intelligence to sell the war to Congress and the public. Despite the patchy and unreliable underlying information, intelligence reports became increasingly assertive about the growing danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s illusory arsenal.

In 2007, the intelligence community produced another controversial National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). This time the topic was Iran’s nuclear program. Unlike the first case, this estimate was prepared under the assumption that it would remain classified, and analysts were surely surprised when then-President Bush ordered its publication. The estimate became the target of intense criticism, especially from Republicans who accused intelligence agencies of undermining the administration’s aggressive posture toward Iran. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger called it “policy conjecture” masquerading as objective intelligence. Peter Hoekstra, the former House intelligence committee chairman, called it a “piece of trash.”

In reality, the NIE was accurate and prescient. It concluded that Iran had disbanded its organized nuclear weapons research program in 2003. At the same time, it noted that Iran was continuing enrichment work apace and that Iran would have sufficient material for a bomb by 2015 if it chose to enrich its uranium stockpile to weapons grade. This prediction, which was supported in later threat assessments, has been borne out in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports and open source analyses. Meanwhile there is no evidence to suggest that Iran had resuscitated its weaponization effort at any point between 2003 and 2007. If the estimate was so naive, as critics would have it, they are at a loss to find proof that it was substantively wrong.

Despite all the criticism, intelligence on Iran’s nuclear program has been a success story. The 2007 NIE made the useful distinction between Iran’s suspended weapons effort and its ongoing enrichment program. It served as the baseline for subsequent analyses, which refined what was known and unknown about Iranian capabilities and intentions. The Director of National Intelligence’s annual threat assessments give a flavor of the evolving view of Iran’s capabilities and intentions. The conclusions incorporate new information about Iran’s nuclear program but do not contradict the bottom line in the original NIE. Iran was building the scientific and technical infrastructure to master the nuclear fuel cycle, but it had not restarted the weapons program.

Nor was the intelligence community surprised by Iran’s revelation of a second enrichment plant called Fordow. On the contrary, it had been surveilling the site for months and perhaps years before Iran started installing equipment for centrifuges in 2009. Intelligence officials have publicly and privately asserted that they were watching closely but were reluctant to come forward until they could make a convincing argument that the facility, buried under a mountain near the city of Qom, was designed to house uranium centrifuges. No subsequent reporting appears to challenge these claims.

President Obama appears impressed by this record. The White House has expressed confidence in the intelligence community’s ability to keep track of Iran, and Obama has a particularly close relationship with CIA Director John Brennan, whom he has backed despite calls for his resignation. All of this suggests that policymakers are using intelligence to help inform their judgment about the nuclear deal and to monitor Iranian compliance in the
aftermath. So far, so good.

The problem is that policymakers are also using intelligence for political purposes. Rather than simply letting secret intelligence inform its private discussions, the administration is enlisting it to help sell the nascent nuclear deal with Iran. Last week, for instance, Brennan spoke about the ongoing negotiations at Harvard University. Beyond discussing general issues related to intelligence, he included praise for U.S. policy, arguing that sanctions had badly hurt Iran’s economy and caused Tehran to give away far more than expected. The deal, he said, was “as solid as you can get.” Brennan also took aim at critics, some of whom are “wholly disingenuous” for their claims that the deal provides Iran with a pathway to the bomb.

It is easy to understand the temptation to use intelligence as a public relations vehicle. Individuals tend to believe that private documents are more reliable than public statements, and they associate information quality with secrecy. Thus when leaders use secret intelligence to justify their policy choices, they remind skeptics that they are privy to unique sources and thus deserve the benefit of the doubt. Selectively releasing intelligence also implies that more valuable information remains classified.

But using intelligence in public is dangerous. My research shows that it often pushes the community toward firm conclusions even when the underlying information is open to multiple interpretations. Leaders involved in policy disputes do not benefit from intelligence that betrays uncertainty or doubt. If a gap appears between intelligence conclusions and policy statements, policymakers may pressure intelligence officials to alter the tone and substance of their conclusions. Examples abound. In 1967, Johnson administration officials pressured the CIA to provide optimistic assessments of progress in Vietnam in order to overcome growing opposition to the war. Two years later, the Nixon administration leaned on intelligence to hype the Soviet strategic threat in order to help sell a controversial missile defense program in Congress. In both cases the underlying information was ambiguous and contested inside and outside the intelligence community, but the demands of the public debate meant that policymakers could not tolerate signs of doubt or disagreement. So they removed them.

In addition, using intelligence to win public debates discourages reassessment — even if new information appears that contradicts previous beliefs. Intelligence leaders are reluctant to review their findings after making bold public pronouncements, because doing so would amount to an embarrassing admission of failure. In the months leading up to the 2003 Iraq War, for example, the intelligence community benefited from new information from inspectors as well as new secret sources. Officials were loathe to reassess their earlier findings, however, despite the fact that it was increasingly hard to justify the earlier estimates. The United Nations and IAEA conducted several hundred inspections, but they found no evidence of active unconventional programs or stockpiles of old weapons. Some mid-level CIA officers were desperate to reconsider the NIE and follow new leads, but they were stymied. “It’s time you learn it’s not about intelligence anymore,” one was told. “It’s about regime change.”

Finally, the decision to use intelligence in public may poison intelligence-policy relations over the long-term. Right now the Obama administration and the intelligence community seem to share a common view of Iran’s nuclear program. But their views may diverge, and intelligence leaders may become unwilling to make the kind of unequivocal statements that political leaders crave. If this occurs there may be a falling out that outlasts the current administration. Past intelligence-policy breakdowns have created mutual mistrust and hostility that lingered for years after the fact.

As the administration pushes to complete the Iran deal it should keep these dangers in mind. The expectation that intelligence will be part of the foreign policy debate has already led to surprisingly specific revelations about issues including Syria’s use of chemical weapons and U.S.-Saudi intelligence sharing in Yemen. U.S. policy is somewhat ambivalent on these issues, however, meaning that the risk
of politicization is low. In the case of the Iranian nuclear deal there is no ambivalence: the administration is clearly staking itself to a nuclear deal in the face of substantial Senate opposition, and it is using intelligence to help make the case. This is a recipe for politicization. If intelligence conclusions start to drift from policy beliefs the White House will be strongly tempted to bring it back into line.

The administration should also reflect on the reasons that intelligence on Iraq was a disaster while intelligence on Iran was a triumph. Before the war in Iraq, intelligence was buffeted by the demands of an administration that

needed to use it to justify the invasion. In 2007, however, there was no expectation among analysts that their work would be aired in public. The result was an estimate that has stood the test of time and subsequent intelligence built on the NIE to form a wide-ranging picture of Iran's nuclear activities. If the White House continues to use intelligence to sell the Iran deal, it risks sacrificing that record.

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What Americans really think about an Iran deal

By Steven Kull and Shibley Telhami, University of Maryland

Many of the arguments Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made in his speech to Congress on Tuesday probably resonated with his American listeners, including the argument that allowing Iran to keep a uranium enrichment capacity poses dangers. As we found in a survey we conducted Feb. 19 to 25, Americans care about many of the considerations that he has been raising. But, even putting aside the partisan nature of Netanyahu’s speech, it is still unlikely that the substance of what he said will move the majority of Americans to oppose making a deal with Iran that would allow it to have a limited uranium enrichment program.

The survey — fielded by GfK among a nationally representative panel of 710 Americans, with a 4 point margin of error — showed that large majorities of respondents found arguments convincing both for and against making a deal, including the kind of arguments made by Netanyahu. But in the end, 61 percent of participants broke in favor of making a deal allowing limited enrichment, provided that there are intrusive inspections, rather than ramping up sanctions in an effort to get Iran to give up all enrichment.

Netanyahu argued forcefully that Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon would pose an extreme threat. But our survey shows that the question for Americans is not whether there is a threat but how best to respond to it. The argument he made, that more sanctions will lead to a better deal, did prove at least somewhat convincing to many, but in the end they did not think that was the way to go. And his argument that raising higher the requirements for getting a deal — requiring a general improvement in Iranian behavior as well as stopping enrichment — is unlikely to make a lot of headway as Americans do not appear to have a lot of confidence that more sanctions will even stop Iran from enriching.

If the debate about a deal with Iran gets a higher profile in the next weeks, advocates for and against a deal will see
heads nodding and get the impression that they are making major headway with their audiences. The U.S. public can see that arguments on both sides of the issue have merit, but, when asked, they do make a clear decision — even in the face of tough challenges.

In the survey we presented respondents with a briefing on the debate surrounding the negotiations with Iran. We also asked them to evaluate a series of 12 strongly stated arguments for and against making a deal and for and against ramping up sanctions. These arguments were fully vetted with congressional staffers from the Democratic and Republican parties and advocates for both positions.

Large majorities, as much as two-thirds of respondents, found all of the arguments at least somewhat convincing. Overall neither position appeared dominant.

When participants were asked whether they could tolerate each option, majorities said they could tolerate either making a deal or ramping up sanctions, though the option of making a deal was tolerable to a larger majority, and the majority grew after evaluating the arguments.

But most significantly, when asked for their final recommendation, making a deal based on limited enrichment was favored not only by 61 percent overall, but also 61 percent of Republicans, 54 percent of Evangelicals, and a plurality (46 to 41 percent) of strong Tea Party sympathizers. Among those who watch Fox News daily, views were divided, with support for the deal rising to 55 percent among those who watch Fox News only two to three times a week. Frequent viewers of Christian broadcasting networks were the exception: They favored more sanctions by 58 percent.

While the survey was taken just before Netanyahu’s speech, it had been widely reported that Netanyahu has opposed a deal. His opposition does not appear to have had an effect on survey respondents. The percentage of participants supporting a deal in this survey was exactly the same (61 percent) as it was when the Program for Public Consultation (PPC) ran the same set of questions in June 2014. Respondents’ attitudes toward the speech may have also dulled any possible effect: 51 percent of all respondents in the current survey thought that it was inappropriate for Netanyahu to speak to Congress without a diplomatic invitation.

The bottom line is that Americans are deeply ambivalent about making a deal. They find convincing the arguments that making a deal is the best option because bombing would just lead Iran to rebuild underground, invading is not a real option, intrusive inspections will give us the ability to know what is going on in time if Iran tries to break out, and Americans would never let another country tell us we have no right to a nuclear energy program.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Final Recommendation on Iran’s Nuclear Program</th>
<th>Make a deal with Iran that allows limited enrichment</th>
<th>Increase sanctions to get Iran to give up all enrichment</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>GOP</td>
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<td>Ind</td>
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Strongest Argument for Negotiating Limits

No matter what happens, making a deal with Iran to limit its enrichment will put us ahead of where we are now. If Iran sticks with the deal, we’ll know they aren’t making a nuclear weapon. If they try to break out of the deal, with more intrusive inspections, we will have much better means to spot it immediately and it will be so completely clear that we will be better able to mobilize the world against them. Either way we come out ahead.

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<th>Strongest Argument for Negotiating Limits</th>
<th>Convincing</th>
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<td>GOP</td>
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But they also find persuasive the arguments that the United States should not let Iran defy the U.N. Security Council’s demand that they stop enriching, that limited enrichment will give Iran the ability to refine their enrichment.
capacities thus positioning them for a breakout and that if the United States dismantles the international sanctions against Iran now it will very difficult to reestablish them if Iran starts cheating.

Arguments in favor of ramping up sanctions to pressure Iran to give up all enrichment are also found convincing by majorities, including the arguments that the sanctions are clearly working as evidenced by Iran’s desire for a deal; that Iranians’ readiness to accept the pain they have endured with sanctions is proof that their real goal is getting nuclear weapons; and that the United States needs to keep the momentum of the sanctions going.

On the other hand, majorities also find convincing the arguments that sanctions have clearly not worked to get Iran to give up enrichment while they have worked to get Iran to accept limits; that the only way to ramp up sanctions is to punish other countries who trade with Iran and this will make these countries angry at the United States; and that if the United States does not follow through when Iran is ready to make a deal we will likely lose the support of our partners, thus undermining the whole sanction regime anyhow.

If the Obama administration does make a deal with Iran in time for the March 24 deadline, Americans are going to be bombarded by all of these arguments as Congress and the pundits jump into the fray, as well as outside voices like Netanyahu’s.

But despite finding all of these arguments persuasive, our research suggests that Americans will not be immobilized by their ambivalence from coming to a conclusion, or simply divide along party lines.

At this point it appears more likely that Americans will come down in favor of a deal. But the fact that Americans are responsive to a wide array of considerations suggests that they will scrutinize the final terms of the deal and be responsive to even subtle considerations. The details will matter. Still, it’s unlikely that there will be trumping arguments one way or the other, including by the leader of a country that is important to many Americans.

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The framework deal announced last week over Iran's nuclear program has sparked a wide-ranging discussion that has focused on its security and geostrategic ramifications. But it is important to recognize that for Iran, the nuclear program must be understood not just as a security issue or as an attempt at "street-legal proliferation" but also as a prestigious and scientific enterprise. From this vantage point, the face-saving parts of the deal are precisely what make it possible for Iran to accept it. Less obviously, the deal could keep key scientific constituencies within Iran not just satisfied but also potentially invested in nonproliferation. Such a scientific investment in the new framework will allow for much more transparency, minimizing the risk of "sneak-out." This would be far better for regional and international security than military attacks, which tend to accelerate and drive programs underground.

The face-saving dimensions of the deal – including maintaining a set of centrifuges at the Fordow enrichment center, continuing research and development on advanced centrifuges and international collaboration in some areas of research – may be politically problematic, but they are crucial for its acceptance in Tehran. Scott Sagan has pointed out that the nuclear literature typically focuses on security rather than prestige; as I have argued, providing an alternate way to gain prestige other than developing nuclear weapons is crucial to counterproliferation. For example, prestige substitution was necessary for the 1994 Agreed Framework, which froze North Korea's plutonium production for at least eight years. North Korea insisted on being provided with light-water reactors as a substitute, having refused faster and more appropriate fossil fuel replacements, so that they could save face and still be able to claim that they were a nuclear state. Similarly, the U.S. 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities recognized the importance of prestige, arguing that "...opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways, might—if perceived by Iran's leaders as credible—prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program."

Iran's focus on face-saving measures is clear from the conditions of the deal. Indeed, the New York Times reported that "...[U.S.] administration officials were struck by the fact that Iran was willing to waste 1,000 centrifuges, essentially spinning uselessly, to preserve national pride." Iran's fact sheet frames the deal as an advancement in its nuclear capabilities assisted by others, since “in cooperation with some of the countries of the P5+1,” the Fordow facility will be “converted to an advanced nuclear and physics research center.” This rhetorical sleight of hand elevates Iran to an advanced nuclear power working side-by-side with the most prestigious nuclear states in the world, allowing Iran to accept severe limitations on its nuclear program.

The scientific communities involved in nuclear programs are too often treated as “black boxes,” simple agents of the political authorities. Yet they represent significant constituencies in their own right, and Iran’s must be satisfied with the outcome of a deal. In other cases, we have seen nuclear programs created and maintained by strategic enclaves that resist nonproliferation and keep programs alive even when they are out of favor with a country’s leadership. For example, George Perkovich has detailed how scientists in India consistently kept their program alive despite the disinterest of politicians. The potential for such an enclave in Iran already exists. The Washington Post reported that the “high confidence” of the 2007 NIE that Iranian efforts to build a nuclear weapon had ended in 2003 was based, in part, on “intercepted calls between Iranian military commanders,” who were “complaining that the nuclear program had been shuttered.” Indeed, satirical takes on the deal serve to remind us that we should not underestimate scientists and others inside Iran who may have an interest in scuppering in such a deal. As Cheryl
Rofer points out at the Nuclear Diner, keeping Fordow open will help to “[keep] the scientists busy in the same way the International Science and Technology Center kept former Soviet weapons scientists employed when the Soviet Union collapsed.”

There are some inherent risks in keeping scientists busy. Indeed, tacit knowledge is one of the most important aspects of any nuclear weapons program, and keeping scientists together in the same teams helps to preserve that knowledge. But as former U.S. deputy secretary of state William J. Burns pointed out in an interview with Politico, “they [Iranians] know their way around basic enrichment technology, and you can’t wish that away, you can’t dismantle it away, you can’t bomb it away.”

Fortunately, as I have argued, enrichment technology is only one of the multiple hurdles that any nuclear proliferator must overcome, and attempting to gain expertise, materials and technology from foreign sources can be counterproductive. Among other problems, Iran’s approach of outsourcing components has left it vulnerable to sabotage, which continues to be an important unstated factor in the Iran talks. Consequently, allowing for teams to continue enrichment is a risk worth taking, especially if, as Jacques E. C. Hymans argues, the key to an agreement is to befriend the scientists in order to help to strengthen domestic Iranian stakeholders against proliferation. The key is to connect scientists to civilian industries and reinforce non-military uses of nuclear technologies such as medical isotope research; as Stephen Flank has posited, it was failures in India’s civilian nuclear power program that led scientists to align instead with military programs, speeding up Indian nuclear weapons development.

The scientific community offers a very significant potential strategic opportunity, as well. Their support for the deal will allow for improved transparency through its monitoring of practically every aspect of Iran’s nuclear program. Despite the emphasis in these negotiations on calculations of Iran’s ability to “break out,” the main concern should be whether Iran can overcome the remaining tacit knowledge hurdles to a nuclear weapons capability covertly and, as James Acton pithily put it, “sneak out.” As Jeffrey Lewis has argued, we should be thinking in terms of “…maximizing our ability to detect covert facilities, not limiting the breakout time.” Even skeptical commentators such as Kori Schake have supported the deal due in part to its solid inspection provisions. Can this be done effectively? Charles Duelfer has argued that the Iran deal won’t work without tough inspections and enforcement similar to the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) established in the aftermath of the Gulf War. At first glance, the U.S. intelligence community’s poor record for assessing the status of foreign nuclear programs could be problematic.

Fortunately for the Iran deal, although Adam Mount and I found that the U.S. intelligence community has tended to err in a direction that is favorable to those who remain skeptical of a deal, since it has generally tended to overestimate progress toward a nuclear capability. Moreover, our study indicates that the intelligence community had consistently overestimated Iran’s progress prior to 2007. It has become a running joke that Iran has been two years away from a nuclear weapon for three decades. Mount and I also noted that it is quite rare for the U.S. intelligence community to underestimate a nuclear program; our list shows that it hasn’t done so since Iraq in 1991 (although Hymans disputes that Iraq was anywhere close to a weapon even then). This bias works in favor of a deal; indeed, the more likely danger is that overestimation will lead to overreaction. Moreover, the extensive monitoring agreed to in the deal, including allowing for inspections of non-nuclear facilities under the Additional Protocol, will produce much more valuable information and allow for better assessments. Iran’s acquiescence to strict limits on its centrifuge research, re-engineering of its heavy water reactor and extensive monitoring of its entire domestic and (remarkably) foreign supply chain clearly indicate that it is willing to credibly commit to transparency. This will keep Iran dependent on foreign suppliers for many of its key components, thus still leaving it vulnerable to sabotage and short of knowledge on how to indigenously produce those parts if the deal were ever to be broken.
As Austin Long has argued, this is, in fact, a good deal even for “hawks” who wish to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities. It should provide new degrees of transparency and information, even if Iran ultimately reneges. Similar to Victor Cha’s arguments on “hawk engagement,” it is important to seriously attempt engagement in order to demonstrate the United States’ willingness to bargain and to test whether Iran is serious about the deal. Indeed, the key issue for Iran has been whether the Obama administration was willing to take yes for an answer. Fortunately, it now appears to be the case that the United States is willing to attempt to not shoot first and ask questions later. This is not the best of all possible deals, and many important parts of it still need to be ironed out, as seen in the gaps between the Joint Statement, the U.S. fact sheet and the Iranian version. But the framework offers a solid plan that is in line with an understanding of nuclear weapons programs as sources of pride and as complex scientific organizations.

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The Iranian nuclear controversy is also about saving face

By Thomas E. Doyle, II, Texas State University

Iran’s nuclear program is often regarded as a classic case of national security interests driving a government’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons. Though security interests play an important role in Iranian nuclear decision-making, other factors also matter for the Iranian leadership, and some of these have normative or moral components.

In his seminal piece on nuclear proliferation, Scott Sagan argued that nuclear weapons (as well as nuclear energy) programs provide states with important status and prestige functions. In my new book, “The Ethics of Nuclear Weapons Dissemination,” I argue that Iran’s drive for national status and prestige is largely anchored in a moral imperative to avoid national humiliation.

Iranians have experienced humiliations linked to the decline of the Persian Empire and more recently to the CIA’s overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and the suffering of chemical weapons attacks by Iraq in the 1980-88 war. Iran’s nuclear program aims significantly at reversing the national humiliations suffered and restore to Iran a sense of pride and prestige that comes with mastering nuclear physics. Mohammad Asgar-Khani, the father of the Iranian nuclear program, once argued:

… Iran needs to nuclearize itself. ... A nuclear Iran must not be seen as a threat to its neighboring countries or to Israel. [A nuclear program] is necessary not only as a substitute for fossil energy but also for Iran’s social cohesion and prestige. ... Internally, Iran is in a state of disarray. I would argue that, only by becoming a nuclear weapons state, can Iran consolidate its social coherence.

If this remark accurately captures a big part of the complex motivational stance of Iranian leaders today, then Iranian nuclear pursuits are more about the moral value of a restored sense of national identity than has heretofore been appreciated.

Iranian nuclear pursuits resemble those of France and India. When the French acquired nuclear weapons in
1960, Prime Minister Pierre Mendes-France and other officials framed their decision more in terms of national “grandeur” in the context of past or prospective national humiliations than in strict terms of security. For example, one official said that the French nuclear weapons program was about “… the metaphysical survival of France … and that moral, political, and historical annihilation would be seen as worse than only the physical destruction. France must be prepared to risk the latter to save her honor, save her identity.” In this statement, it is the validation of French grandeur and the continuation of that legacy that matters, even if territorial integrity itself is put at risk.

For Indian officials, their 1998 acquisition of nuclear weapons was “tangentially about security.” Instead, their “significance is emotional [and] the target is not China and Pakistan. It is the soul of India.” Clearly, Indian “grandeur” counted as a driver of New Dehli’s nuclear break-out.

As I argue in my book, the French and Indian statements are similar in that they offer a moral imperative to secure national identity and to overcome the national humiliations each had experienced in the past. Moreover, the need to prevent future national humiliation can often lead to an emphasis on the moral principles of justice and fairness within international treaty regimes.

Highlighting these three instances of morally driven nuclear pursuits is not to deny that some states are driven primarily by strategic considerations – such as the 1998 Pakistani nuclear tests. Instead, I’m trying to draw attention to the previously under-appreciated idea that state officials publicly defend their nuclear policies to address a background conflict of political values – values that cannot easily be divorced from moral values. Iranian leaders recognize their legal nonproliferation commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. They also believe that avoiding future national humiliation is a primary matter with moral import. France’s preference for metaphysical survival over mere territorial integrity can help explain why Iran is willing to risk so much by refusing to be obsequious in the face of Western nonproliferation demands.

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The real vs. the surreal options on Iran

By Michael E. Brown, George Washington University and Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, Women in International Security

The negotiated framework on Iran’s nuclear programs, announced in Lausanne, Switzerland on April 2, promises to place substantial, verifiable limits on Iran’s nuclear capabilities, even if it won’t completely eliminate all of Iran’s nuclear activities. Critics of the framework have proposed two alternative options: the imposition of enhanced sanctions that, they say, would lead to “a better deal,” or direct military action. Advocates of these options are engaged in wishful thinking. Neither option is likely to lead to a better outcome from the standpoint of U.S., regional and international security.

Enhanced economic sanctions are the current alternative proposal getting the most attention. There are three major problems with such proposals, however. First, in most cases, economic sanctions are effective only when they are multilateral, involving all of the target country’s main economic partners. The current sanctions against Iran have been effective precisely because the P5+1 – Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States plus Germany – have all supported the sanctions effort. At this point, however, there is no enthusiasm in Europe, Russia or China for enhanced sanctions against Iran.

Sanctions involve economic costs to sanction-imposing countries, not just the target, and it is unlikely that Europe, Russia or China, will want to make further economic sacrifices. The European Union’s economy is expected grow by barely 1 percent in 2015, and Russia’s economy will shrink by 3 or more percent. Meanwhile, China’s growth rate will be its lowest in 25 years. Within days of the Lausanne announcement, Russia announced that it would proceed with the sale of air defense systems to Iran. Likewise, Chinese and Iranian officials met to discuss expanded economic ties within days of the announcement. Without multilateral support, the enhanced sanctions option is a mirage.

Second, even if enhanced sanctions were implemented, it is unlikely that Tehran would make substantial concessions. The sanctions play a complex role in Iran’s domestic political economy that intersects with its intense factional politics. Iran’s leadership is clearly determined to have some enrichment capability and to keep its current nuclear facilities open at least at a nominal level. Iran’s leaders have wrapped these issues in a nationalist narrative that they are unlikely to abandon for both ideological and political reasons: They believe the narrative, and they want to stay in power.

Third, economic sanctions frequently become counter-productive over time. As cases in Iraq, Serbia and other contexts have demonstrated, international sanctions often lead to a “rally around the flag” reaction. Nationalists and patriots do not like to see their countries treated harshly, even if they do not support the people who are running their countries. Hard-liners double-down because they don’t want to show weakness. Plus, a nationalistic narrative makes it easier for hard-liners to crack down on their more moderate domestic political opponents. The result is that policy concessions become less likely.

All of this suggests that the enhanced sanctions option is far less plausible than it appears on the surface. Nor should anyone have any illusions about the costs, consequences and likely outcomes of a military option. This likely would be a major aerial assault, involving many sorties over many targets and producing many civilian casualties. The repercussions in the Middle East would be complex and dire. The transatlantic relationship would be rocked at a time when transatlantic solidarity is needed to counter Russia’s aggression in eastern Ukraine.

As for Iran itself, air strikes would probably destroy its nuclear facilities and set back its nuclear program for several years, but then what? The most likely scenario is that Iran’s nuclear program would become a fervent nationalist cause – widely embraced by hard-liners and
moderates alike. Driven by patriotic pride and a desire to acquire a nuclear deterrent, Iran’s leadership would go all-out to acquire a nuclear weapon capability as soon as possible. Tehran would throw out all of the international inspectors, and it would throw off the current constraints on its nuclear activities. The international sanctions regime would crumble.

Iran would not have to start from scratch. It has already learned the nuclear fundamentals: It knows how to produce plutonium, enrich uranium and stockpile fissile material. This knowledge cannot be destroyed. The initial attack would give Tehran an added incentive to hide and disperse its new nuclear facilities in anticipation of future strikes. Iran is a large, mountainous country – larger than Britain, France and Germany combined – that provides an abundance of sites for secret and well-protected nuclear facilities. Iran could succeed in building and hiding a nuclear weapon program. Instead of eliminating Iran’s nuclear activities, then, an aerial assault could lead to an Iranian nuclear weapon capability in less than 10 years.

Neither enhanced sanctions nor military action therefore holds out great prospects for effectively dealing with Iran’s nuclear challenge. The Lausanne framework isn’t ideal, but it is the only path to negotiated constraints on Iran’s nuclear program, and it is the best option for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

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Regional Context

Why an Iran deal won’t lead to nuclear proliferation

By Dina Esfandiary, King’s College London and Ariane Tabatabai, Georgetown University

When the P5+1 and Iran announced their framework agreement earlier this month, some analysts reiterated that a final deal would result in a proliferation cascade in the Middle East. This widely held and long-standing assumption remains largely unchallenged. But a careful look at the actual technical capability, political and security context, and intentions of potential contenders confirms that much of this hype is baseless.

Those who invoke the proliferation cascade theory often confuse both the cause and the actual result. Would a nuclear agreement with Iran or nuclear-armed Iran cause a cascade? Does the regional spread of civilian nuclear programs count as a proliferation cascade, or is it restricted to the spread of the bomb?

On their own, civilian nuclear programs are not a threat. They are permitted under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are pursuing or exploring nuclear power to address growing energy demands – needs that have been growing irrespective of Iran’s nuclear program or plans.

But developing nuclear power is neither easy, nor cheap. There are a number of technical, legal and political hurdles regional states need to overcome.

Should they do so, then the fear is that aspects of their civilian nuclear programs will pave the way for the bomb. But that, too, is implausible.

First, the entire region, except for nuclear-armed Israel, is party to the NPT. This means that they’ve already legally given up the nuclear weapon option. Moreover, nuclear weapon states can’t legally provide them nuclear weapons either. Second, many countries have safeguards agreements and some, the additional protocol, in place. This means that their programs are under close International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) scrutiny.

None of these states have expressed an interest in reprocessing, which closes the plutonium path to the bomb. Some have even foregone enrichment, which blocks the uranium path to the bomb. That’s the case for the UAE. But some states, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, want to reserve “the right” to enrich. Riyadh went further and stated it wanted whatever Iran got out of the negotiations, including enrichment.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE are all dependent on foreign suppliers and expertise for their programs. They lack the human capacity for the programs. Foreign involvement makes it difficult, though not impossible, to covertly develop a nuclear weapon. This means that suppliers also need to do their due diligence and ensure that buyers use their equipment for purely peaceful purposes.

One explanation as to why Tehran went so far in developing its indigenous nuclear technology, including enrichment, is that international suppliers weren’t as involved and reliable after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Following the revolution, Iran’s original suppliers, the United States, France and Germany, dumped the country, which then looked East. It went to Pakistan, including the illicit nuclear procurement network led by Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan, Russia and China. But Iran’s government believed it could not rely on any of these partners. Without a strong involvement in its program by foreign suppliers committed to nonproliferation, Iran was able to pursue indigenous nuclear technology. This diminished the international community’s leverage on Tehran.

The Iranian context, however, is different from other countries in the region, which depend on the West and U.S. allies for their nuclear programs. Today’s nuclear newcomers must comply with certain international requirements for their programs to be completed by these suppliers. This means that suppliers can and should try to limit the further proliferation of enrichment and reprocessing.
But technical constraints aside, there are political obstacles to the proliferation cascade theory. Countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia are dependent on Western allies for their security. Washington can leverage this influence to stop them from going nuclear. The United States showed its willingness to do just that in 1988, when it learned that Riyadh purchased Chinese missiles and it threatened to block the sale of military equipment.

A final agreement on the Iranian nuclear program would be a win for the region. A regional proliferation cascade is an unlikely result. There are too many barriers to it. It is time to remove the cascade assumption from the policy equation. Most importantly, killing a diplomatic process and negotiated deal for the sake of yet another ill-founded “domino theory” would be a grave mistake.

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The Iran deal sharpens the Persian Gulf region’s sectarian divide

By Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

How has the Iran nuclear framework deal affected Sunni-Shiite tensions in the Persian Gulf region?

In an ideal world, the framework should begin to lower the region’s sectarian tensions, paving the way for a new era of interdependence. As Iran’s moderates ascend and as its malign meddling in fractured Arab states declines – the theory goes – the jittery gulf monarchies will in turn feel more confident to dial down their sect-based bashing of the Islamic Republic. They will be less inclined to treat Iran as an existential menace and more as a friendly competitor – if not a full-fledged partner – in regional order. With their airwaves, clerical pulpits and Twitter feeds cleared of sectarian vitriol, the gulf monarchies’ domestic spaces will enjoy new breathing room, perhaps even enabling a fresh push for measured political reforms.

This was certainly part of President Obama’s long-term vision for the plan – to establish what he called an “equilibrium ... between the Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, gulf states and Iran.”

Unfortunately, this happy scenario is still a long way off: The Persian Gulf region is actually experiencing an alarming surge in sectarianism. Iran’s militant adventurism embodied in its Quds Force has continued unabated – and might even increase after the injection of funds from the lifting of sanctions. Although the framework received a tepid official endorsement from Riyadh, Sunni commentators in the gulf media are universally suspicious, seeing in it continued U.S. weakness, if not duplicity and unchecked Iranian power. “A palace made of sand,” one Saudi columnist wrote of the agreement. More sectarian voices like Saad al-Burayk attacked the deal as an ongoing war on Sunnis that was meant to free up Iranian funds for Yemen’s Houthis, while the Sahwa activist Mohsen al-Awajy condemned it as a “Zionist-Safavid platform” and urged Saudi Arabia to acquire its own nuclear capability.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the run-up to the nuclear deal saw a spike in Saudi-driven Sunni triumphalism stemming from the Arab military intervention in Yemen. Whatever potential benefits to sectarian relations the Iran deal could have offered have been offset by the escalating violence in Yemen – strife that gulf commentators and clerics are framing in starkly sectarian terms.

The Saudi decision to launch “Operation Decisive Storm” was rooted in very real security concerns about the Houthi’s military buildup on the border. It was also intended to force Washington's hand on confronting Iran's regional policies. Yet there was also an unstated domestic calculus behind the invasion that followed a longstanding practice of playing the sectarian card to bolster domestic support for ruling families. This is certainly not new, as I've argued in a recent book. Simplified, the strategy goes something like this: Keep your political opposition divided amongst Sunnis and Shiites, keep your publics fixated on an external threat, and portray your benevolent rule as the only buffer against the impending chaos – the glue that keeps an otherwise fractious polity together.

Aside from its deleterious humanitarian effects in Yemen, Decisive Storm has been an effective execution of this strategy from the Arab gulf rulers’ point of view. The Saudi-led war with Yemen’s Houthis came at a time when potentially troublesome and deeply sectarian Sunni constituents in gulf states, including clerics within the "official" establishment, were obliquely criticizing the Arab gulf regimes for their participation in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State.

Now those same Sunni Islamists – and even the normally antagonistic Muslim Brotherhood – are rallying behind al-Saud and other dynasties. For example, the enormously influential Sahwa cleric Salman al-Awdla lauded the war as a new display of Sunni unity against “Persian
authoritarianism.” Even in Kuwait, where sectarianism has been relatively muted, this dynamic is unfolding, albeit in a mirror image of the other gulf states, as Madeleine Wells has recently shown. Here, historically loyalist Shiite factions are seeking greater protection from the ruling al-Sabah family from resurgent sectarianism by Sunni tribal oppositionists.

Across the gulf region, the sectarian ripples of the Saudi-led military campaign have been toxic and violent. Most recently, it has launched an increasingly heated war of words between the United States’ two principal allies in the region, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In remarks to reporters in Washington, Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi slammed the Saudi-led campaign and asked rhetorically if the Saudis also had Iraq in their sights. Meanwhile, on the streets of Baghdad, thousands of Shiite protesters, including Shiite militias, have condemned the war and announced their willingness to aid the Houthis. Although such developments are unlikely to spark actual bilateral conflict – Abadi’s comments were directed at domestic audiences and Iran – they further complicate Washington’s efforts to construct a unified Arab front against the Islamic State.

But the war’s more insidious effects are being felt within the Arab gulf states, where the war is closing off political space and enabling a crackdown on dissent. Shiite citizens who do not join in the chorus of nationalist support for the war are being attacked once again for suspect loyalties. Activists that question the intervention on social media are arrested.

In Bahrain, pro-regime Sunni parliamentarians are drawing up legislation that criminalizes any criticism of the operation by “Houthi supporters,” i.e. Shiite oppositionists from al-Wefaq. In the Shiite areas of Saudi Arabia’s eastern province, a policeman died and dozens of Shiite locals were wounded after security forces tried to preemptively disrupt protests in the restive town of Awamiya.

All of this serves to underscore Obama’s comments to the New York Times about the imperative of gulf domestic reform in the wake of the Iran deal. Much of the gulf’s insecurity and sectarian tensions stems from longstanding problems of governance and the uneven distribution of political and economic capital, rather than Iran’s power projection. These are vulnerabilities that no amount of U.S. security guarantees and arms transfers can protect. U.S. policymakers should therefore emphasize at the upcoming Camp David talks that while they will continue to assist in the gulf’s external defense they are also committed to moving the gulf forward on political reform – and they reserve the right to call out gulf deficiencies in public and also condition future aid on reform progress. They should also be leery of lending support to Arab interventions in fractured states that, while ostensibly undertaken for counter-terrorism aims or to check Iranian influence, often have more partisan agendas and end up exacerbating communal conflict.

Even if the nuclear deal paves the way for an eventual Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, we should not overestimate the ability of Tehran and Riyadh to control the region’s sectarian temperature like a thermostat. Non-state actors like the Islamic State, radical Salafis and Shiite militias are increasingly calling the shots, irrespective of the wishes of their regional patrons in the Arab gulf states and Iran. To be sure, a curtailing of outside funding from gulf or Iranian coffers would diminish their capacity to fan sectarian fires. But sectarianism is ultimately a by-product of institutional breakdown and state collapse in the Levant and Iraq – and that won’t be changing anytime soon.

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A bold new Arab vision...for 2009

By Marc Lynch, George Washington University

The Arab League Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh over the weekend produced a show of unity and pledges of support to the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen. Enthusiastic commentators have declared it the dawn of a new era for the Arab world and the launch of an enduring new doctrine of autonomous Arab collective action in the absence of American leadership. In fact, the summit felt eerily familiar. The final resolution was manifestly the statement of an Arab Thermidor Summit. Nothing in it, from the warnings about Iranian power to the counter-terrorism agenda to the ignoring of democracy and political freedoms would have felt out of place in 2009 – the last time the Saudis launched a doomed war against the Houthis in Yemen. The only thing missing was Hosni Mubarak.

This is not the first Arab summit to produce paroxysms of enthusiasm and ambitious plans for joint action, of course. The Sharm el-Sheikh summit should be seen as the latest in a long line of bids for leadership of the official Arab order, with Riyadh following a well-rehearsed script for such bids. The assembled Arab leaders reaffirmed their mutual solidarity and admiration, called for Arab unity, offered the requisite lip service to the Palestinian cause and carefully ignored areas of serious disagreement. They promised to come together around the campaign to eradicate Yemen’s Houthi movement and pledged to create a joint Arab military force, a move that has grabbed headlines. Arab summit meetings have promised many such things over the years. They are legendary for announcing grandiose initiatives that fail to materialize, and it is telling that the details of this last proposal are conspicuously unspecified.

But the actual impact on the ground is somewhat beside the point. The coalition’s formation is actually a goal unto itself. Arab summit meetings, as Michael Barnett long ago argued, have traditionally been moments in which aspirants to regional leadership seek to define the Arab agenda and assert their own claim to the mythical throne of “Arab leadership.” Metrics of their success typically include the number of heads of state they can convene (the “failure” of several summits in the late 2000s was due to the boycott by key competitors) and the text of the final resolution (even if nobody expects its terms to ever be actually implemented). By these metrics, at least, the Sharm el-Sheikh summit looks to be a Saudi success. Most Arab leaders showed up, including key Saudi rivals such as the emir of Qatar, and there were no major disruptions to embarrass the hosts to compare with notable moments such as Moammar Gaddafí’s 2009 performance in Doha. The final resolution text and most of the speeches closely followed the intended narrative of unity against Iranian expansionism and terrorism and produced the desired promises of material contributions to the campaign in Yemen. It was thus a show of carefully stage-managed symbolic power backed by financial inducement and the cultivation of shared threat.

Supporters are heralding this as a sign of potent Saudi leadership and a new era in independent Arab action. It probably isn’t. The Saudi bid to mobilize an Arab order against the Iranian menace conveys more about the weaknesses of Arab regimes more than it does their strengths. The unresolved demands of the Arab uprisings hang over almost every regime in the coalition, haunting their dreams of legitimacy and stability. Sectarianism has long been a useful framework for Saudi ambitions, both at home and abroad, and its invocation here likely has less to do with real Iranian gains than with their long-standing instrumental use of sectarianism. Such sectarianism has taken far deeper root than in the past, through the steady accumulation of killing and incitement, which has driven the region so far down the road of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Despite this growing internalization of sectarian conflict, the most intense divisions in the region over the last few years have still been among the Sunni powers. Iraq and Syria have unleashed genuine sectarian horrors, too often
embraced on instrumental grounds even by Western analysts. But Iran was only a background player as Turkish and Qatari backed Islamist forces battled Saudi and Emirati proxies across the battlefields of the Arab uprisings. Tehran had no role in the failed transitions in Egypt and Libya and had far less of a role in Bahrain and Yemen than sectarian entrepreneurs tried to claim. Islamists and their adversaries across the region hardly needed Iran to set them at each other's throats. The Emirati-Qatari spat over political Islam has been more divisive than sectarianism within Gulf quarters. Presenting Sunni-Shiite conflict and rising Iranian power as the defining principle of regional order is exceedingly helpful when attempting to impose discipline on these competing “Sunni” forces under Saudi leadership. The Saudi leadership bid crystallizing around the campaign in Yemen looks, then, like a classic episode of a would-be regional power taking the lead in forming a balancing coalition against Iran… just as it's been trying to do for many years. Realpolitik clothed in sectarian drag, as Gregory Gause might put it, lives on.

The summit's final resolution makes these priorities glaringly clear. The opening preamble mentions state sovereignty, stability and national security repeatedly, along with a litany of threats both external and internal that require cooperation. The campaign in Yemen is framed as overturning the Houthi coup and defending “legitimacy,” deliciously enough given that these had been precisely the code words used by the Muslim Brotherhood against the summit's host in the last two years of Egypt's fierce political wars. There’s a call for a global effort against terrorism, including comprehensive intelligence and security cooperation, along with a call to dry up the sources of terrorist funding, which must have caused uncomfortable side-eyed glances between some of the participants. Official Islamic institutions are to lead religious reform to combat terrorism and extremist ideas, a campaign that the media and intellectuals are instructed to support. Democracy is nowhere to be found, of course, with even the section devoted to “soft” issues referring to development and social justice but not to human rights or political freedoms. The prosecution of war crimes also was evidently too awkward to raise during a campaign including Sudan's International Criminal Court-indicted Omar Bashir.

The focus on Iran and its alleged proxies is an effective vehicle for setting aside the mortal combat between competing Arab regimes and regaining some domestic support through the demonization of an ever-convenient internal enemy. The last four years, recall, have been both frightening ones for embattled regimes and deeply divisive ones within the so-called Sunni Arab world. The campaign against Iran offers a convenient way to move on from those years of bitter competition among Sunni powers and movements. Thus, after years of a global campaign led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and to dismantle its local and global networks, those Brotherhood organizations now seek a place under a “Sunni” umbrella. Senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, prominent Islamist figures such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and movements that have clashed with the Saudis, such as Hamas, have all have expressed their support for the campaign. So have popular Saudi Islamists who have been put out by recent policies toward Egypt and at home. The recent convergence between Muslim Brothers and UAE pundits or a friendly kiss between the emir of Qatar and Egypt’s president or a common position on anything among warring Libyan factions would have seemed unthinkable last year.

This cooperation is all quite convenient, even if it’s rather unlikely to last. Most of this will likely be soon forgotten, as the deep divisions between regimes reassert themselves and the intense polarization at the popular level resurges. It was easy for Arab states to agree on a policy toward Yemen, given how little it matters to them relative to the Saudi stake in its southern neighbor, but that agreement does not extend to region-defining conflicts like Libya and Syria.

The profound weakness underlying this would-be new regional order is difficult to miss. Most of the traditional aspirants to Arab leadership remain completely on their backs. Syria and Iraq are arenas for regional proxy war,
no more factors in the regional balance of power than similarly afflicted states like Yemen or Libya. Egypt, despite Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s Nasserist pretensions, remains unstable at home and deeply dependent financially on its Gulf sponsors, leaving it a taker rather than a maker of regional order. This void at the center of the Arab order created an opportunity for the Saudi leadership bid, while the catastrophe on the ground in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen and the rise of the Islamic State has driven a profound and growing sense of threat. The ruins of those countries are a monument to the price of these regional proxy wars and the determination of the autocratic leaders to hold on to their thrones at any price. The prospect of an Iranian nuclear deal is only one dimension, then, of continuing internal disarray.

Nor does any of it bode well for Yemen itself. Many of the same Yemenis, academics and policy analysts who had for years been warning loudly about the deep problems with the Saudi management of the transition from and grant of immunity to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh are now equally skeptical about the Saudi-led military intervention. The military campaign itself will almost certainly quickly bog down, leaving inevitable choices between embarrassing climbdown or unsustainable escalation. The air strikes, being waged over heavily populated urban areas, will inevitably cause the sorts of civilian casualties such as those inflicted on March 30 on a well-known refugee camp. The campaign’s avowed goal of the eradication or disarmament of the Houthis is unrealistic one, as is attested to by Saudi failures to defeat the Houthis militarily over the last decade. Even if it were not so impractical, doing so would only be an easy first step compared to the difficulty of any forcible reimposition of state authority in Yemen. But since the real goals of the campaign are likely elsewhere, Yemenis seem to be the latest victims of yet another regional proxy war without end.

How sectarianism shapes Yemen’s war

By Jeff Colgan, Brown University

Saudi Arabia and Egypt are mounting a military intervention in the ongoing civil war in Yemen. They have been here before: In the 1960s, both countries intervened in the fight between North and South Yemen. However, 50 years ago, they were on opposite sides of the conflict; now they are on the same side. The switch says much about current Middle East politics and how we should understand the politics of alliances generally.

Some analysts argue that the violence in Yemen is not sectarian. That’s partially true, if one looks only within Yemen: The Houthi rebels are a heterodox Shiite group, but they have fought alongside Sunnis against the incumbent government. Locally, this is mostly a political contest for power. But if we look at the broader Middle East to see how foreign governments are aligning and intervening, it is impossible to miss the sectarian divide. Sunni governments, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are backing President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who is Sunni, whereas Shiite governments, such as Iran and Iraq, as well as non-state groups, like Hezbollah, support the largely Shiite rebels.

The sectarian nature of today’s rivalries in the Middle East contrasts sharply with the last time Egypt and Saudi Arabia intervened in a Yemeni civil war. In the 1960s, Egyptian
President Gamal Abdel Nasser led a pan-Arab nationalist movement that threatened the legitimacy of monarchies like Saudi Arabia. Egypt, along with Iraq and other Arab republics, supported North Yemen. Saudi Arabia and other monarchies, including Iran (which was a monarchy at the time), helped the royalists in South Yemen. Just like today, Yemen’s battle was part of the larger political contest in the Middle East – but now the central cleavage has switched from regime type to sectarian identity.

Why has sectarianism become activated in ways that make it matter so much more than it did before? Part of the answer involves recent wars in Iraq and Syria. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 not only reversed the domestic balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, but it also unleashed insurgencies that deepened the sectarian divide across the region. The Islamic State has capitalized on and contributed to such division. In Syria, myriad rebel groups fighting President Bashar al-Assad have competed for funding and support from foreign donors. Sunni regimes have mostly funded Sunni fighters, while Iran supported Shiite fighters, including Hezbollah.

The last decade has deepened the sectarian divide, but it was politically activated much earlier, in a contest between rival narratives of legitimacy. In the 1960s and 70s, the Saudi government wanted to use pan-Islamism to counter Nasser’s pan-Arabism. When oil revenues boomed following 1973, the Gulf monarchies poured money into mosques and organizations like the World Muslim League. The influx of oil money came just at the wrong moment, when leaders and elites were looking for ways to politicize Islam. The Saudis later regretted that strategy after the Iranian revolution took pan-Islamism in a new anti-royalist direction. Paradoxically, this only drove the Saudis to burnish their own Islamic credentials more brightly, even restyling their king as the “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia set in motion an even deeper fissure between Sunnis and Shiites.

The greater relevance of religious sectarianism today teaches us to avoid not one but two common ways of looking at Middle East politics. On one hand, many analysts and policymakers need to downgrade the importance they attribute to religion. Some analysts are arguing that the current sectarianism reflects “ancient hatreds,” thereby implying they are permanent and immutable. Yet most scholars reject the idea of ancient hatreds, arguing instead that sectarianism is a latent factor that can become politically activated by elites or circumstances. The remarkable political realignment in the parties intervening in Yemen, comparing 50 years ago to today, demonstrates that sectarian divides are not always a salient feature of politics. Indeed, the dramatic change in the course of a single lifetime illustrates the political malleability of sectarianism.

On the other hand, scholars of international relations should upgrade their estimate of the importance of religion, for alliance politics and much else. A whole generation of policymakers and scholars learned from Stephen Walt’s seminal book on the origin of alliances. Walt argued that certain things matter for the balance of threat – such as geography, offensive capabilities and threat perceptions – while others, such as ideology, do not. The book is silent on religion. Religion is certainly ideational if not ideological, which suggests that our understanding of alignments needs updating. This will not surprise specialists on religion and politics, such as Ron Hassner, Stacie Goddard and Thomas Hegghammer, but most scholars probably need to update their mental model to better account for ideational factors like religion.

Finding a middle ground between these two views of religion in politics requires nuanced understanding. In today’s Middle East, activated sectarianism affects the political cost of alliances, making them easier between co-religionists. That helps explain why Sunni-majority states are lining up against Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah over Yemen. Still, the sectarian rhetoric lies on the surface of what is a deeper and long-running conflict about regime legitimacy, what one commentator calls a battle between “Muslim monarchical rule and Muslim republicanism.” Some Sunni but republican states, like Pakistan, are resisting Saudi Arabia’s attempt to use sectarianism for regional alignments.
Regional Context

U.S. policymakers can see instability in Yemen and elsewhere in one of two ways. The first is as a sudden, violent upsurge of underlying sectarian hatred. The better way is to understand sectarianism as an instrument in a long-running regional contest between rival narratives of regime legitimacy. This understanding should shape foreign responses to regional events. Rare, individual security threats might call for a U.S. military response, but over the long run the situation calls for a different approach. Only local participants can resolve the contest over regime legitimacy. The United States will do damage by intervening too heavy-handedly.

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Sectarianism and authoritarianism in Kuwait

By Madeleine Wells, George Washington University

The prominent Kuwaiti Shiite lawyer and former member of parliament Khaled al-Shatti was arrested April 2 after posting tweets critical of the Saudi-led Arab coalition’s fight against the Houthis in Yemen. His tweets suggested that the Houthis – Yemeni Shiite rebels supported though not controlled by Iran – are growing in power.

Shatti, who was released on bail April 6, was charged with challenging the emir, demoralizing Kuwaiti soldiers, offending the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and threatening Saudi relations with Kuwait.

His Twitter protest is not the only evidence of discord against Kuwait’s foreign policy. Seven out of Kuwait’s 10 Shiite parliamentarians (in a body of 50) also criticized the Kuwaiti Air Force’s participation in Saudi Arabia’s “Operation Decisive Storm,” on the grounds that it violates Kuwait’s constitutional prohibition on offensive war.

Their outspoken protest is unusual and telling: The Shiite MPs of Kuwait are the only such group in the region empowered by a positive legacy of regime-minority relations to take a stand against their government’s foreign policy on an official, institutional level. This level of activism is nonetheless surprising even by Kuwaiti standards. A Kuwaiti political persona tweeting in favor of the Houthis is shocking and out of the norm of Shiite actions in Kuwait since the 1990s. And Shiite MPs taking a stand against the Saudi campaign on any grounds stands out as quite significant as compared to both the quiet Shiite activists in neighboring Saudi Arabia, who are worried about local sectarian backlash from the war on the Houthis rather than contesting the foreign policy itself, and the more bellicose response of Shiite political factions in Iraq, who have publicly protested the Saudi campaign and even had one MP offer to send fighters to defend Yemen.

Sectarianism has been getting worse in the Gulf, and many analysts generally conceive of this as an international process. Indeed, analysts have warned that a Saudi-led war on the Zaydi Shiite Houthis could devolve into a proxy war with Iran and further sectarianize the Middle East.

The fact that Arab Sunni states have entered a coalition to fight a Shiite non-state actor in Yemen allegedly backed by Iran would, indeed, seem to be evidence of sectarianism. But sometimes what looks like sectarianism and regional
ethnic hatreds is actually just good old domestic politics. As Marc Lynch argued in a 2013 Project on Middle East Political Science symposium, “The sectarian narrative radically exaggerates both the coherence of the ‘Sunni’ side of the conflict and the novelty of a long-standing power struggle with Iran. It is better understood as a justification for domestic repression and regional power plays than as an explanation for Middle Eastern regimes’ behavior.” That perspective applies to Kuwait’s new sectarian tensions as well.

My dissertation research – which addresses why governments change their policies toward non-core groups such as the Shiites of Kuwait – suggests that policies such as these political arrests actually have very little to do with their ethno-religious characteristics or even with the Iranian boogeyman’s growing power in the Gulf. Instead, they are calculated based upon their oppositional potential. That is to say, it is not Kuwait’s sectarianism that we must worry about, but rather its re-emerging authoritarianism. The crux of the issue is rentier Kuwait’s semi-authoritarian political structure and the type of dynamic it engenders. As a semi-constitutional monarchy, the highly mobilized Kuwaiti body politic can vote in free and fair parliamentary elections, and the Kuwaiti parliament is unique in the Gulf for having the power to remove confidence in individual ministers and override the emir’s veto via majority vote. At the same time, their choices are ultimately limited by an appointed cabinet that serves at the discretion of the emir. This situation leads to a dynamic in which the shape of the political opposition and the threat it poses to the ruler are variables of primary importance in how any societal groups, Sunni or Shiite are treated by their ruler.

The Shiites of Kuwait, who make up 25 to 30 percent of the population, have a unique place in national and regional history. Recent work by Fred Wehrey, Laurence Louer and Toby Matthiesen demonstrates how Kuwait has long stood out for having the most amicable sectarian relations in the Gulf, especially as compared to its neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. With very few exceptions – such as proportional access to mosques and staffing in high-level defense and interior positions – Kuwaiti Shiites have equal access to the large coterie of welfare benefits offered by the rentier state, including free health care, education, public sector jobs and state subsidized fuel and housing. They are nationalistic and loyal toward their government and feel central to the state’s history and its quest for survival. As such, with the exception of the 1980s – when, inspired by the Iranian revolution, a small group of Kuwaiti Shiites began to push for political reforms, including for Shiite equality, and were institutionally excluded and sometimes-violently repressed – Kuwaiti Shiites have most often been accommodated or co-opted by their government. The times when Kuwait did appear to be sectarian, it was usually doing so for reasons of managing political opposition.

In the 2000s, despite the perceived regional growth and threat of Iran’s power after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, the Kuwaiti regime did not repress its Shiite citizens but instead offered them more religious accommodation. In many cases, the Sabah ruling family has continued to defend the confessional group against growing societal and parliamentary Islamist and tribal sectarianism. Only four years ago, when Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to aid the Bahraini government in suppressing its Shiite-led Arab Spring, the Kuwaiti government decided not to send ground forces. Rather, it ended up sending a largely symbolic naval force instead, likely because the emir was highly sensitive to how its participation might impact Shiite allies in the government. In 2012, the Shiites briefly held 17 seats in parliament, the highest number ever, as a result of an opposition boycott of elections. Likewise, Shiite MPs seem to know their place in Kuwaiti Politics. Even their recent protest against Kuwait joining the Saudi coalition was carefully framed in constitutional terms, demonstrating the extent to which they fear being perceived as going outside the norms of their political system.

What has changed since that would lead Kuwait to join with its Arab allies in a potentially controversial and sectarian cause that could rock the boat with its Shiite allies at home? The answer is that Kuwait, along with many of its neighbors, has become more authoritarian in the
The Kuwaiti crackdown on Sunni and Shiite dissent alike reveals that if anything, the regime does share a strong threat perception with the rest of the GCC, but that it perceives its biggest transnational threat not from Iran, but from the diffusion of democratic movements that may uproot its allied Gulf leaders. Indeed, Saudi itself has partially framed the campaign on Yemen this way – emphasizing its intent to restore Yemen’s elected president to power – in addition to rolling back ostensible Iranian gains in the region. The arrest of Shiites who speak publically about Saudi Arabia’s Yemen campaign, as sectarian as it looks on a superficial level, must thus be seen within the overall context of the progressive tightening of domestic security by a continually stressed Kuwaiti regime.

In this light, regime-Shiite relations have more to do with how formidable the political opposition is becoming in the Gulf and the shared regional threat of empowered domestic constituents than any single other factor. It’s not sectarianism, but authoritarianism. It is the internal threats to Gulf regimes like Kuwait, driven by their lack of meaningful reform in the last decade, that drives Gulf regimes to internationalize domestic problems in terms of “security” and sometimes “sect” (read: Iran) in order to distort and drive focus away from meaningful, local grievances. Regime treatment of Shatti for supporting the Houthi cause is one part of this larger authoritarian whole. Shatti’s tweets were outside the bounds of what he was allowed to do as part of a co-opted minority with traditionally good relations to the ruler, but also what is expected of him as a citizen of a beleaguered semi-authoritarian regime. As such, he has been bluntly told to stay out of oppositional and regional politics and go back to his lane. As one Kuwaiti source told me about the incident, after Shatti’s release, “He’s out, but they are keeping him close.” The question now is, will he and his co-sectarians stay there?

The answer is a bit of a catch 22. It depends on whether or not societal and regional anti-Shiite sentiment continues to burn from the spark the Saudis ignited. On the one hand, Kuwait’s participation in the invasion of Yemen

aftermath of the region-wide and domestic uprisings that started in late 2010. The ruling elites of the Sabah family are reeling from the cross-class Islamist-tribal-youth coalition that has only intensified its demands for political reform since the Arab Spring, in addition to intra-family factionalism and allegations of coup plotting. To deal with this situation, Kuwait has revived some unique ways of stemming the ongoing opposition movement. In 2014, over 30 people were deported and stripped of their citizenship for supposedly undermining the country’s security. Most recently, at least 18 people were reportedly arrested at an March 23 anti-government protest, including regional human rights defender Nawaf al-Hendal, who had addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council only three days earlier. Hendal has since been released but his case has been referred to Kuwait’s Criminal Court.

More importantly, in the past few months it has become clear that there is not only a red line for Kuwaitis criticizing the emir, but a taboo on criticizing Kuwait’s regional allies as well. Several other Kuwaitis who have criticized the Saudi regime or involved themselves in public domestic opposition campaigns have been targeted as well. Shatti was joined by Shiite writer and academic Salah al-Fadhli, who was also arrested for speaking out about Yemen. Another Shiite MP, Abdulhameed Dashti is awaiting trial for criticizing the Bahraini government, and former Sunni MP Mubarak al-Duweileh was questioned over his criticism of the rulers of Abu Dhabi. Kuwait is not out of the norm for suddenly prosecuting regional dissent – Bahrainis criticizing the Saudi campaign in Yemen were immediately arrested, too. This regional criminalization of dissent is something that has been facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council’s Security Pact, which Kuwait was the last state to sign. The pact has given legal means for the persecuting of opposition forces all over the Gulf, ostensibly on security terms. As Madawi al-Rasheed explains, “Meant to enhance security for economic development and stability of GCC countries, the pact has now tuned into creating cross-border controls, evacuating the Arab Gulf of dissent and eliminating safe havens for dissidents of one country in another one.”
may be just the catalyst its Shiite citizens need to move away from their longstanding alliance with the Sabah family. The semi-authoritarian Kuwaiti system that gave them the same freedom to criticize Kuwaiti foreign policy in constitutional, legitimate terms may offer them the opening they need. This would mean an even more formidable and further cross-cutting opposition to the Kuwaiti government and could perhaps augur for real political change. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti tribal-Islamist opposition has in the last decade become increasingly sectarian itself. This makes it likely the Shites will continue to stand by the Kuwaiti regime in spite of their underlying disagreement with its foreign policies and lack of reform because they have no other alternative source of protection. In this sense, Saudi-driven sectarianism in the region seems to have inadvertently reinforced Kuwaiti authoritarianism as well.

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.