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How to denuclearize Iran

Lessons from Libya



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COMMENTARY

By Robert Joseph
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OPINION:

An emerging view is that the outcome of the Iran negotiations should be the same as that achieved with Libya: the complete, irreversible dismantlement of Iran's nuclear program. In December 2003, Libya agreed to the total elimination and removal of all associated equipment and materials, as well as its longer-range SCUD missiles. Within four months, everything had been taken to the United States.

Iran is not Libya. Iran is a much larger country in almost every way. Iran's nuclear program is far more advanced to the point of being a virtual nuclear weapons state, and the negotiation history could not be more different. The U.S. has been in on-and-off public negotiations with Iran for more than 15 years across four administrations. With Libya, it was one day of secret talks in London, preceded by several months of U.S.-British-Libyan intelligence contacts, that produced what can serve as perhaps the only meaningful outcome with Iran.

Libya had multiple motivations for agreeing to give up its program, such as seeking sanctions relief and knowing that its nuclear program had been penetrated and that its deliveries from A.Q. Khan had been interdicted. Most importantly, Col. Muammar Gaddafi had convinced himself that Libya would be next on the U.S. target list after Iraq. There was no reason or need to threaten Libya with bombing as Gaddafi was quick to tell almost every visitor that he did not want to be Saddam Hussein. The images of Saddam being pulled from his spider hole days before the London meeting played on his mind.

Many observers dismiss Libya as a model for Iran, pointing to Gaddafi's fate in 2011 with the lesson that if leaders agree to give up their nuclear weapons program, they will end up dead. More than a convenient talking point, this has been said so often by Iranian and North Korean leaders that they have likely convinced themselves it is true.

However, it's important to distinguish between the George W. Bush model of 2003 and that of President Obama eight years later. Mr. Bush's goal was to have Libya serve as an alternative model to Iraq. Instead of war, proliferators would give up their nuclear programs in exchange for relief from economic and political sanctions. Eight years later, with the urging of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Mr. Obama intervened in Libya's civil strife. The irony of an administration that placed nuclear nonproliferation at the top of its national security priorities taking an action that turned the Libya model on its head has been lost in the intervening years.

In any case, it's not the Libya model that is relevant today. It's the Libya outcome. Any outcome that permits Iran to enrich uranium at any level will fail the one standard that Mr. Trump has established: Iran will not be allowed to have a nuclear weapon.

Limiting enrichment to even low levels will allow Iran to break out of the agreement at any time, no matter what the agreement says. Perhaps Iran's leaders will wait until Mr. Trump leaves office; perhaps changes in circumstances will encourage them to move sooner.

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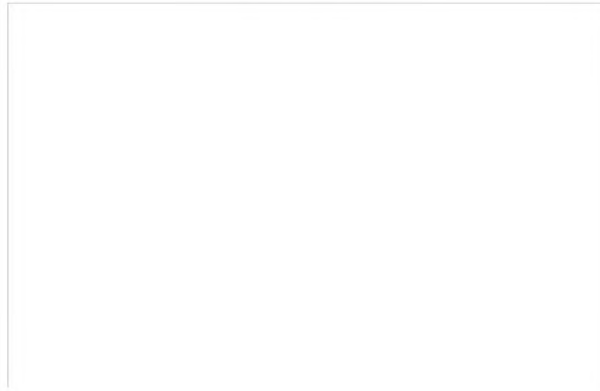
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Given Iran's acquired knowledge and its ability to produce and operate advanced centrifuges, permitting any enrichment will allow Iran to quickly enrich to weapons grade clandestinely or in the open. Even if effective verification measures are part of the agreement, they do not guarantee compliance or assurance that the prohibitions are being observed. Iran has demonstrated that it will violate any nuclear-related agreement whenever it desires. Threats to bomb Iran, if the agreement is violated, would have little effect on Iran as it knows that such a threat would be hollow coming from previous and perhaps future presidents.

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As he should, Mr. Trump is giving negotiations a chance, as almost everyone would prefer a negotiated outcome to a bombing. Although the chances for an agreement prohibiting all enrichment are narrow, they cannot be ruled out. The circumstances are more favorable today than at any time in the past. Iran is weaker and more desperate than ever, externally and internally.

However, Iran is not a normal government that observes the rules of international behavior or fair “dealmaking.” This is a regime that relies on regional terror and brutal repression of its citizens to stay in power. It has a long history of using negotiations to expand its nuclear program. Its negotiating tactics are clear: Extend the negotiations as long as possible and meet any concession with more demands.

Although Mr. Trump has expertly set the framework for the negotiations, we will see what happens when the negotiators meet again. If the two-month deadline is extended or if the talk is about concessions and compromise, the opportunity to prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapon through negotiations will be in jeopardy.

With Iran, as it was with Libya, this is not about compromise and finding common ground. This is about ending Iran’s illicit and illegal nuclear program in a meaningful, verifiable and enduring manner. If that is accomplished, the Iranian people will benefit. However, as U.S. negotiators

have proved in the past, many potential bad agreements can result from the ongoing negotiations. Will we insist on the one outcome that is in our interest and the interests of our allies? As Mr. Trump would say, we shall see.

• Robert Joseph was a special assistant to President George W. Bush when he led secret negotiations with Libya. He later served as undersecretary of state for arms control and international security.

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