

Testimony of Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns
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Mr. Chairman, Congressman Deutch and members of the committee, I am grateful for this opportunity to testify on the Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran.

I support the negotiations under way in Vienna to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons power and believe the U.S. is warranted to seek a diplomatic solution to this challenge, if one is possible.

Since serving as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 2005 until 2008 when I had responsibility for Iran policy in the State Department, I have followed this issue closely. I consider Iran's drive for nuclear weapons to be unacceptable if we wish to see a future of peace for the Middle East. Stopping Iran and keeping it under close international inspection is one of the most important national security objectives of the United States.

The American effort to thwart Iran has been underway for more than a decade. While there have been differences between the Bush and Obama Administrations on Iran policy, there has also been an important degree of continuity that has served our country well. Both Administrations offered to negotiate with Iran on the nuclear issue. Both sanctioned Iran when it refused to negotiate. Both led the construction of a strong international coalition against Iran. And, both have been willing to use force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

In my view, both the Bush and Obama Administrations have acted seriously and responsibly to maneuver Iran towards the only solution acceptable to our country—an Iran locked into strict and verifiable international commitments that prevent it from constructing a nuclear device.

A tough-minded, detailed agreement reached in Vienna by the U.S. and its partners--the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China-- with the Iranian government would serve that strategic aim. It would be the most effective path the U.S. could take at this time.

Until we see the final text, if one is agreed, and the specific details on inspections, verification, sanctions and other provisions, it is not possible to make a final judgment about the proposed deal.

But, if the final agreement includes tough restrictions in these areas as well as those on Iran's program announced on an interim basis in early April, it will be worthy of Congressional support.

The interim agreement stipulated that Iran's nuclear research program would be effectively frozen for the next decade and, in some respects, for an additional five years beyond. This would very likely deny Iran the capability of producing a nuclear weapon during this timeframe and would, as President Obama has argued, close off every route to a nuclear weapon during that period.

The interim agreement also mandated that Iran's plutonium program be blocked. The core of the Arak Heavy Water reactor would be dismantled and the reactor converted so it cannot produce significant quantities of plutonium. Spent fuel would be transported outside of Iran's national territory. There would be no reprocessing of fuel inside Iran itself on a permanent basis.

This agreement would diminish the capacity of Iran's civil nuclear enrichment program. There would be no enrichment at Iran's plant at Fordow for fifteen years. There would be a greatly diminished number of centrifuges in operation at Iran's plant at Natanz for ten years. Advanced centrifuges would not be permitted at Natanz for ten years. And Iran's store of enriched uranium would be capped at 3.67 percent and limited to only 300 kilograms--below levels needed for a nuclear weapon for fifteen years.

As President Obama and Secretary Kerry have argued, the net result is that this agreement, if it is reached, would prolong Iran's breakout time from two to three months now to at least one year for the next decade.

Second, the interim agreement negotiated with Iran would provide for an intrusive inspection regime led by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure access to any suspect facility inside Iran, including military facilities. IAEA inspections of Iran's nuclear supply chain would last for twenty-five years. Iran would be subjected permanently to enhanced IAEA inspections under the Additional Protocol.

Third, a key component of the interim agreement is that the U.S. and other signatories can re-impose sanctions should Iran violate its terms in the future. And many of the most intrusive sanctions on Iran would not be lifted immediately but only after Iran has carried out the commitments it has made to dismantle much of its nuclear program. The details on how sanctions re-imposition will work will be a key element of a final agreement.

Fourth a final agreement would give the U.S. and our partners an opportunity to stop Iran's nuclear initiatives by negotiation and diplomacy and not by force. While I believe we should maintain the threat of force and be willing to use it should that be necessary, we are certainly better off seeking a diplomatic solution at this time. The use of force carries with it the risk of unintended consequences and could spark a wider conflict. A negotiated agreement is a smarter and more effective strategy that would box in Iran for a decade to come.

This would not be, of course, a perfect agreement for the U.S. by any means. As with any negotiated agreement of this kind, the U.S. and its partners would make difficult compromises to gain the advantages I have summarized.

Under the terms of the interim agreement, much of Iran's nuclear program would be suspended but its basic superstructure would survive, much of it in mothballs. It could be rebuilt after a decade's time when the limitations on Iran's program begin to lapse.

In addition, the ultimate effectiveness of any agreement will rest on the ability of IAEA inspectors to maintain a clear line of sight into all of Iran's nuclear activities. Should Iran cheat on its commitments, and that is a distinct possibility, the inspectors must have complete freedom and flexibility to ferret out all shortcomings and evasions by the Iranian authorities.

Much also depends on the ability of the U.S. and its allies to re-impose sanctions should that be necessary. Ensuring that Russia and China stick with the U.S. and Europe in cracking down on Iranian transgressions will be an important factor in implementing an agreement.

These trade-offs are real and will have to be monitored closely by the current Administration and its successors. Successful implementation of the agreement will require a tough-minded attitude by the U.S. for many years to come.

Despite these concerns, I remain persuaded that the agreement would be the best alternative available to the U.S. at this time. I see no other course that would give us a greater probability of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon. That is the key determinant that members of Congress must keep in mind. Is there a more effective alternative to this agreement that would enable us to stop Iran's nuclear program?

Some have suggested the alternative that Secretary Kerry should have walked away from the negotiating table instead of committing the U.S. to this agreement. The weakness in that argument is that it presupposes we could have then maintained international sanctions as leverage against Iran. I am not persuaded that would have been the case. In this scenario, P-5 unity on sanctions, particularly on the part of Russia and China, might have weakened. It might have also been difficult to keep other countries critical to the sanctions regime fully on board.

I fear that a U.S. walk out would have diminished and possibly even dissolved the power of the sanctions regime we have imposed so successfully on Iran to date. U.S. sanctions alone would not, as you know, constitute effective deterrence against Iran. The sanctions applied by Presidents Obama and Bush and by the Congress were very important. But, it was when the European Union imposed financial and oil and gas sanctions against Iran and other nations began to curb trade in important sectors that Iran felt the weight of a truly global campaign to stop it. An effective

sanctions policy against Iran requires global involvement that would have been put at risk if the U.S. had walked away.

There would have been another negative consequence in walking away from the negotiating table. Iran's nuclear program, effectively frozen in place since the Joint Plan of Action went into effect in January 2014, would suddenly have been unshackled. Iran would have been free to expand its enrichment and plutonium activities. It could have produced weapons grade uranium. We would have been blind to many of their activities as international inspections would have been in jeopardy.

Walking away unilaterally from the negotiating table would pose a number of fundamental challenges to us and weaken our current leading role in the international coalition against Iran. There are times when the U.S. must act alone to protect its most important interests. In this case, we are stronger by continuing to lead a well-organized global coalition against Iran.

For some years now, Americans and Israelis have debated the merits of using military force against Iran to arrest its nuclear program. I believe it will be essential that we keep a credible threat of force on the table as one of our options for many years to come. But, this is not the time to use force, in my judgment. Iran is not on the verge of constructing a nuclear weapon. The sanctions have been effective in driving Iran to the negotiating table. The Administration is negotiating an agreement that serves our interests more capably than the use of force with its likely risks. While U.S. air strikes could very well set the Iranian program back, they could not eliminate the technological knowledge Iranian scientists and engineers have developed through many years of research and that would enable them to reconstitute a nuclear program.

As the Congress prepares to review the Iran nuclear deal and to vote on it, I hope every effort will be made to create a united partnership with the Administration as we move forward. We are, after all, likely only at the end of the beginning of the Iran nuclear challenge. The strategic imperative of stopping Iran from ever acquiring nuclear weapons will fall on a succession of Presidents and Congressional leaders in future years. This joint responsibility requires, by definition, a high degree of cohesion and good faith between both branches of government.

In just the next few months, for example, the Administration will need to ensure P-5 unity in facing the inevitable problems in Iranian compliance with the agreement. It will also need to maintain an international consensus to re-impose sanctions, if necessary.

The U.S. will also face the difficulty in working, in effect, with two Iranian governments as we move to the implementation stage of the agreement. Secretary Kerry has been negotiating this agreement with an Iranian Foreign Minister who reports to a relatively reformist Prime Minister. But, there is another Iranian

government we will have to confront in the immediate period ahead—the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Command, other radical state militia and, especially, the conservative, anti-American Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran’s complicated and disputatious government may well challenge the effective implementation of the overall agreement.

As the nuclear deal is implemented, the U.S. will also need to lead an international initiative to contain Iran’s assertive push for power into the heart of the Sunni world—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. The U.S. will need to strengthen our coalition with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to contain Iran’s reach in the Middle East. The Administration should also close ranks with Israel and put aside the public disagreements that have weakened that vital partnership during the past year. In this respect, it will be important that the Administration continue to refuse to lift the UN-imposed arms embargoes on Iran that have been in place for nearly a decade. This is no time to help Iran augment its power in a violent and unstable region. Instead, the U.S. should impose a containment strategy around Iran until it adopts a less assertive and destructive policy in the region.

We are entering an entirely new phase of our relationship with Iran. After thirty-five years of minimal contact with its radical government, Washington and Tehran are talking again. While it is far too early to re-establish formal diplomatic relations, it is to our advantage to have Secretary Kerry and other senior American officials remain in contact with the Iranian government. Far from giving Tehran undue recognition, talking to Iran makes us smarter about their intentions, permits us to monitor their implementation of the agreement more closely and provides a channel for us to convey the most frank messages and warnings.

There may be some issues where contact with Iran will work to our advantage. Syria is one possibility. Afghanistan is another. In most other cases, diplomatic contact will reinforce the tough positions we have staked out to limit and contain Iranian influence in the region and to deny Iran its ambition to become the central Middle East power.

For these reasons, I do not believe we will see a honeymoon phase between the U.S. and Iran, as some are predicting, during the next few years. Our differences with Iran will outweigh our agreements on many, important issues.

In sum, I support the strategy the Obama Administration has pursued on the Iran nuclear issue. Thanks to both President Obama and President Bush before him, we are on the verge of succeeding, after ten long years, to place Iran’s nuclear program under strict international supervision.

A nuclear agreement with Iran will be supported by the United Nations Security Council where the United States can exercise the veto. And, if Iran violates the agreement or tries to break free from its constraints in the future by racing towards

the nuclear threshold, the U.S. will retain the power and the right to use any means available, including military force, to stop it.

Members of Congress from both parties will ask tough questions of the Administration given the importance of the Iran nuclear issue to American interests and those of our partners in the region. I hope Congress and the Administration will then be able to close ranks and to work together on a united basis to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions.