

# **Center for Strategic & International Studies**

## **Schieffer Series: Exploring the Iran Deal**

### **Panelists:**

**Margaret Brennan,  
State Department Correspondent,  
CBS News**

**Jay Solomon,  
Foreign Affairs and National Security Correspondent,  
The Wall Street Journal**

**David Sanger,  
National Security Correspondent,  
The New York Times**

### **Moderator:**

**Bob Schieffer,  
Anchor, “Face the Nation,”  
Chief Washington Correspondent, CBS News**

### **Introduction:**

**H. Andrew Schwartz,  
Senior Vice President for External Relations,  
Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**Location: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.**

**Date: Thursday, September 10, 2015**

*Transcript By  
Superior Transcriptions LLC  
[www.superiortranscriptions.com](http://www.superiortranscriptions.com)*

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Good evening and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My name's Andrew Schwartz. And it's my pleasure to welcome our first Schieffer Series panel of the season. So this is really a treat. And before we even start, I'd like to say hello to one of my bosses, our trustee. General Scowcroft, thank you for being here, sir. (Applause.) I have another great announcement. There's another gentleman in this room who—nobody knows this yet. You're the first to actually hear it outside of the CSIS family. But as of probably tomorrow or next week I will be issuing a press release that says that Mr. Bob Schieffer is one of CSIS's newest trustees. (Applause.) And we are so thrilled to have Bob join our board.

Welcome to all you horned frogs in TCU who make this possible, and to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation that makes this possible. It's so important. Your support means the world to us.

We've got a terrific panel tonight on the timeliest issue—one of the timeliest issues that we're facing in the foreign policy world and national security. So with that, I'll welcome Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Thank you all very much. (Applause.) And let me just say, I think one of the nicest honors I've ever had is to be asked to be on this board. And I'm really, really excited about it.

We have a great panel today. My friend David Sanger, national security correspondent for The New York Times, on two Pulitzer teams – winning Pulitzer teams at The New York Times. Probably knows as much about this issue as anybody, except these two people. (Laughter.) And they know just as much as David does. Jay Solomon, who gets a lot of stories for The Wall Street Journal. How long have you been covering diplomatic stuff?

JAY SOLOMON: Oh, I've been on it for about five years.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Five years on that. He comes by it naturally. His dad was a United States ambassador. Is he here?

MR. SOLOMON: He is, back there.

MR. SCHIEFFER: There he is. Ambassador, stand up. Let us say hi to you. (Laughter, applause.) And my friend Margaret Brennan, who I must say is the best hire at CBS News in about the last 10 years. She covered global economics for about 10 years for Bloomberg and CNBC, a graduate of the University of Virginia, was a Fulbright scholar, speaks Arabic, studied Arabic in the Middle East. And Margaret, I have to, as the first question—I've got to ask you: What is this all about. (Laughter.)

MARGARET BRENNAN: I just got back two days ago from the Middle East. I was in Egypt for a wedding. So it's not a tattoo; it's henna, which is a traditional sort of decoration to do. And it hasn't faded yet. So it looks like I drew on myself with magic marker. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: I just thought we ought to clarify that before we – (laughter) – before we got into the questions.

Well, as I'm sure most of you know, the Senate – oh, how do I say this? The senate didn't block the treaty – or, it's not a treaty – it's the Iran agreement. The motion to proceed, as it were, failed by two votes. So the agreement – I guess we can say the agreement is there now. The House is – over there they're in some sort of an argument amongst themselves about what they want to do. And from what I can figure out, they really have not come to any kind of a conclusion. The Republicans are trying to block it, but they can't figure out who they want to go about doing that. The Democrats I guess are for it. But am I right in say, Margaret, for all practical purposes this agreement is now in place?

MS. BRENNAN: Well, there's nothing that the administration believes Congress can do to stop it. The implementation doesn't start –

MR. SCHIEFFER: You don't hear her? Are these mics not on?

MS. BRENNAN: My microphone is on here. On again, can you hear me now? OK, now working.

When it comes to actual implementation, "implementation day" quote-unquote, isn't a date on the calendar. It actually won't start rolling out until a good many months from now. So this isn't immediate after they resolve this fight in Congress. It's not all of a sudden the deal is in place. But the diplomacy really can't be unwound. It can be damaged, but the agreement is there. And it looks like it's going forward.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, for – it's my understanding the Republicans are going to make another run next week in the Senate trying to block it, but the consensus so far seems to be that that's not going to go anywhere. So where do we go now from here? What does happen now? Margaret says it'll be a few months before it actually is in place, but what's the next step here?

MR. SOLOMON: Well, I think immediately what's going to be interesting is last week the supreme leader of Iran said his parliament, the Majlis, has to vote on it. So in the next couple of weeks, the Iranian parliament, they're going to have their say. And one of the still kind of unclear characters in this whole thing is the supreme leader. He has not sort of formally endorsed it yet. He's kind of said negative things. He's really ramped up his anti-Israel rhetoric. He said Israel's going to get wiped out in the next 25 years yesterday. So the Iranian political situation still has to play out kind of in reaction to what happens here.

And then one of the other kind of wild cards that could block what Margaret is talking about, which is implementation day, is the IAEA is doing an investigation into past military work, evidence that the Iranians had been trying to build a nuclear weapon. They're supposed to put out this report by the end of – by December. And they're supposed to kind of gather all their information by mid-next month. Technically, if the Iranians aren't cooperating, and there's a lot of evidence they aren't – a lot of evidence they're not, the IAEA could say, these guys didn't cooperate in addressing this past work and therefore the deal can't go forward.

I don't think anyone thinks the IAEA – I think they're under incredible pressure to just say, OK, they kind of played ball and that's going to get kind of dealt with. But to me, that's one of the real dangers of this agreement as it stands, that issue of its weaponization I don't think is going to be addressed. And that's going to kind of lurking there for the next 10 or 15 years as this agreement plays out.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me just go back to the first thing you said about the Iranian parliament. Does anybody seriously think that the Iranians themselves won't approve this deal?

MR. SOLOMON: I don't think so. I think most people think Khamenei was kind of using that to say, OK, if the Congress does block it or does something really crazy, I can use my own parliament as a way to back out of this and kind of protect myself. I think most people don't think – don't think Khamenei really likes to sort of take a position. He always wants to have an out. So he has that political space to do it. But I think now that the politics here seem to be kind of clarified, I think this assumption is that the parliament will sort of kick and scream, but it will go forward.

MS. BRENNAN: And there was an interesting poll out in the last two days, I think AFP published it in English, of the Iranian public. To the degree that it's accurate, I don't know. But it was saying basically how the Iranian public believes they're actually getting far more than what is in the deal itself as we know it. They believe sanctions are going away entirely virtually overnight. They believe that their government really hasn't given ground to the degree that the deal itself has actually put limitations on enrichment and development. So the public's expectations certainly seem high. But exactly what Jay said, it's actually – all of this come down to implementation. Right now, we're arguing about words on a page. It doesn't really matter until it's put in place. And that's when we can judge, you know, whether it's a success or not.

MR. SCHIEFFER: David, you and your colleague over at The Times put out a pretty lengthy question and answer piece. Is that going to be in the paper-paper tomorrow? I think it's already on the –

DAVID SANGER: You know, it's already online. We use the paper as sort of a – more of an afterthought now after you put it online, right? (Laughter.) But I assume so. But the essence of it is sort of just to lay out, as Margaret and Jay just have, what it is that's got to get done. And the list is pretty big.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, I was going to say, just from your own list, what are the things that you think are the most important things we need to know here, and what's the takeaway?

MR. SANGER: So there's the most important and then there's the most controversial, which I think Jay hinted at with the IAEA. So here's a list of the things they have to do. They have to shift about 98 percent of their fuel out of the country before the sanctions get lifted. They have a choice. They can either ship it out or they can dilute it down. It doesn't look like they have the technology right now to dilute it down, or at least do it that fast. So they're going

to have to do something that they spent a lot of time telling the three of us when we were in Lausanne in the spring that they would never do, which is send it out of the country.

Secondly, they're going to have to decommission about 13,000 of their 19,000 centrifuges. And that's probably more easily achievable. Thirdly, they're going to have to take all of the inner workings of the Arak reactor, that's A-R-A-K, reactor, and particularly that part of it that basically produces plutonium, and remove that and submit a redesign that would not take them to bomb-grade uranium. And then they've got to go answer these questions from the IAEA.

So the first three things we mentioned are all highly measurable. And I would doubt they're going to cheat on those in the beginning because it's going to be pretty obvious. With the IAEA, they have a chance to play a lot of games. There are these two, what the Republicans call, secret side agreements, and what the IAEA calls their usual confidential agreements between the agency and any country being inspected. Those usually aren't made public, including the agreements they have with the United States about what they can inspect here.

But in this case, it gets to the heart of the central question, which is: Are they serious about allowing the inspections to happen? One of the agreements which would take them into a place called Parchin, which is where there is believed to have been some experimentation done before. All the indications are that the Iranians will be taking their own samples under some kind of IAEA remote monitoring and then turning them over to them. I'm not sure that, say, the National Football League, or the baseball league, would allow this for drug testing for their players. (Laughter.)

The second thing they've got to accomplish is that they've got to answer these questions that Jay laid out. There are a dozen very hard questions that they've avoided for many years about work they did on designing nuclear triggers, work they're believed to have done on designing a warhead itself. Now, the way this is worded, the IAEA only has to certify that they're beginning to get answers, but they do not have to satisfied that they were satisfied with the answers. So it's not clear, for example, that they actually have to let them go in and interview a man named Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was the lead designer of many of the weapons programs. They've never been able to interview Fakhrizadeh or any of his other staff. And so the question here is what will constitute good enough for the IAEA?

MR. SOLOMON: And one other interesting part on this is the supreme leader is – the Iranians deny they ever had a weaponization program. Throughout the negotiations they said, we've never had it. The documents are forged. It doesn't happen. And the supreme leader put out a fatwa, so it's against our religion to try to develop a nuclear weapon. One of the interesting questions, if the IAEA puts out assessment that, yeah, they did have a weapons program, but we're satisfied enough that the agreement goes forward, how would the supreme leader respond, because you're basically challenging his whole political base. And that's something that – by the end of the year they're supposed to put out this report. And no one knows how they IAEA is going to handle this.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What bothers – I'd like just to ask all three of you – what bothers you about this agreement? And what makes you feel good about this agreement? I mean, what do you think's the best part of it, Jay, and what do you think is the part that you're really concerned about?

MR. SOLOMON: Well, I think this agreement is a big bet politically, because they're going to maintain their infrastructure to make weapons and in 10 years they're unrestrained, basically. Even though there'll be monitors, but they can have an industrial scale nuclear program. And that's the real problem. I don't think the president says it, but most people say Khamenei's 75. He's probably not going to live much longer. You could have a very different Iran in 10 years. And we're just not that worried about it. And we bought 10 years and we averted the potential of an Israeli strike, or – I think that's the potentially good part.

I think the really dangerous part is I find it very hard to believe the Saudis, the Emiratis, or some of these other Gulf countries are not going to look at 10 years from now, when the Iranians are basically going to be unrestrained, and say: We're going to have to have the same technology as they do. And the Saudis, they now have a relationship with Pakistan. They could potentially bring in a weapon from Pakistan. And so I think the proliferation threat is real and I think the White House has really kind of pushed that away, or said it's not really a problem, because they don't have that technology.

And I think the fact that you're lifting a weapons embargo on the Iranians and the missile embargo, I think you could definitely feed into what we're seeing right now across the region, which is an arms race and kind of inflame the Sunni-Shia conflict even worse. And I think that's – I mean, the White House has been talking about, OK, as part of this agreement, we're going to give even more weapons to the Arabs, and even more weapons to the Israelis. I don't see how that's going to stabilize that region.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Margaret.

MS. BRENNAN: I would say if you really listen to what both many of the Arab diplomats would say to you privately and what the Israelis will say publicly, if you parse what they're saying, a lot of these complaints aren't actually about the nuclear program, per se. It's really about Iran's role in the region. Most of the complaints are about – and concerns – are about empowerment and emboldenment to destabilize throughout the region, throughout the world.

And so that's what's interesting in this, is it's – it is a long-term bet in many ways on the future of Iran, but it's also a long-term bet that Iran, while weak, could be the strongest, perhaps most stable, in a very unstable region. And that's a huge gamble for the administration and for all the neighbors who, frankly, look at what Iran is doing in Syria, what Iran is doing throughout the region as, you know, perhaps its true stripes, and that it wants more influence and it will be trying to expand right next door to them.

So I think that's – really a lot of what we're hearing truly is that concern. It has much less to do with enrichment and centrifuges, which is why it's so interesting, because the whole

technical aspects of this are fascinating, but people are really concerned about what Iran will be doing.

MR. SCHIEFFER: David?

MR. SANGER: Well, I think the best part of the agreement is the fact that the Iranians would have a very difficult time rebuilding a serious nuclear infrastructure over the next 10 to 15 years without getting caught. The first 15 years of it look a whole lot better than, say, the agreements that were struck with North Korea, which were three or four pages long, more than a decade ago. This is highly detailed. And I think the chances that they would get caught are pretty high if they do a big cheat.

No Republicans who – interestingly, there are no Republicans voting for this at all. And Matt Bunn up at Harvard made the interesting point the other day that if you look back over the history of arms control agreements that passed in Congress over the past decades, and General Scowcroft would be the expert on this subject, there has never been one that has passed that didn't have at least some significant major bipartisan support. And so if you think of this in that regard, the idea that you've got one party that's basically issuing no votes for it, that's a little bit of a – of a change.

What worries me? A few things. Someone's going to have to buy off the IRGC, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and allow them to go do something. And maybe it's going to be something in the realm of missile activity. Maybe it will be support to Hezbollah. Maybe it will be more work to prop up Assad, although they must think that he's a declining asset right now. I think that there's a good chance, Bob, that they'll pour a lot of this money into their second-favorite weapon, which is cyber, because it's not covered by any international agreements anyplace, and you can actually go out and use it unlike nuclear weapons and unlike ballistic missiles.

So I think that there are fair number of risks that the administration has not wanted to go play up as they have discussed this. And I thought it was very interesting to hear the tone of Secretary Clinton's speech yesterday, where she talked about setting this agreement in a broader Iranian containment strategy. And I wondered, as I was listening to it over at Brookings, whether this debate might have sounded a little different had President Obama basically given the same kind of speech when he spoke at AU at the end of July.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, let me just – I'm sorry, did you want to say something, Margaret?

MS. BRENNAN: Well, I did want to say – I don't know if this is a positive, per se, but it's an unknown – it would certainly be an unknown for whoever is in the White House next. We now do have a regular reason to be speaking to the Iranians in some form or fashion. And we haven't had it for quite some time. And there's enormous potential there. I don't know what that means, truly.

The administration always, as you know, says this is just about the nuclear deal. I mean, everyone knows nothing is truly siloed here. Nothing is clearly in one lane. Everything crosses over. Everything influences yet another country in the region. So the fact that you have John Kerry and Javad Zarif knowing each other quite well, and continuing to talk, we should say, is an interesting development. And it's going to be one that could go many directions. But it's one to watch.

MR. SOLOMON: Although, one question we all have is Kerry's meeting with Javad Zarif, he lived 20 years in the United States, he studied in San Francisco, he speaks English as well as us. You talk to even a lot of diplomats who've talked to the Iranians, and they try to engage Zarif on Syria and Iraq, and he'll say, that's not my brief. That's the Revolutionary Guard. That's a general named Qasem Soleimani who was behind of a lot of what was going on in Iraq, the build-up of the Assad regime in response to the revolution. I don't think – I'm sorry, the uprising in Syria.

I don't think any of us who's covered this closely really can tell, like, is there any connection at all between these diplomats who show up at Lausanne and, you know, speak beautiful English, and the guys who we think really run the country. And it's the supreme leader, and it's the IRGC, and the guys who are meeting with – I mean, there's a lot of reports that this general was in Moscow in July meeting with Putin. And I think there's a perception this buildup we're seeing in Syria now might be related to this. So that's the disconnect, is the guys we – are Zarif and the guys we're talking about going to bring change, or was it just kind of a moment together?

MR. SANGERS: Jay's absolutely right on that, but we also had the question a year ago, did Zarif have the authority to go negotiate this deal. And he negotiated the deal. And you know, in the end the supreme leader, while he hasn't exactly danced up and down about it, has also not said no. And you know, in 2009, we saw the supreme leader kill a deal – it was much smaller – over the Tehran Research Reactor, a reactor that the United States gave to the Iranian during the days of the shah. Actually, I think Dick Cheney was – played a role in that, as he was chief of staff under Ford at the time. That was missed in the speech the other day.

But having given them this technology and gone in that – in that direction, we're at the point right now where many people suspected that Zarif would never have the juice with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, with the supreme leader, to get this deal done. And in the end, it turned out we were wrong on that.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I want to ask you about – we'll go back to Syria in just a minute – but something you were – we have been talking about here, Hillary Clinton saying we need this strategy. Is there a strategy in place now to deal with Iranian behavior? Have we begun to think about that, or it's something still to be decided?

MR. SOLOMON: I think for the last few years there's been a disconnect. I think the negotiations have consumed so much that I – if you look at what happened in the last few years – to me, one of the most interesting times was summer of 2013 when President Obama said he was going to bomb the Syrians in response to this chemical weapons attack, and then it suddenly

stopped. And you know, the political reasons here were an impact. But none of us knew at the time that the U.S. was having direct talks with the Iranians secretly in Oman. And I know the Iranians were telling them: If you bomb our closest ally, we're not going to be able to continue this process. So I think the U.S. did – has pulled back in challenging the Iranians in Syria. We're in a de facto alliance with them in Iraq, because we're both supporting the government in Baghdad against the ISIS forces there.

So I don't think there is kind of a concerted policy yet. I think what Hillary Clinton laid out yesterday is probably the most likely scenario if she wins, and maybe even if Jeb Bush or someone wins, where you're maintaining this – the agreement as much as you can, but you're still going to be forced to challenge them in this region. And with this refugee crisis in Europe, and from being – stemming from the Syria conflict, there's going to be a lot more pressure to end it. And there's just been no evidence so far that this agreement is going to bring the Russians and the Iranians on board to sort of work with us to end that conflict.

MS. BRENNAN: And it's interesting. I was talking to an Iranian diplomat right before the deal. We had an extended conversation. And I walked away from it with this huh moment, where he said to me: You know, the U.S. and Iran have shared interests. You want to pull back from the Middle East. And this is our neighborhood and we want to stabilize it and we want to do this. And it was like, wow, they're seeing this, you know, focus of the U.S. to pull back and to reengage elsewhere in the world as a sign, here you go. And that is not – you know, here's the region to you. And that is not what the United States would present this as. But it's an interesting perspective.

And so when you ask the question of, well, how are you going to counter Iranian influence, or how are you going to address them apart from these sanctions you saw in the past few days with designating, you know, Hamas groups with links – leaders with links to Iran and elsewhere. It's not clear how the U.S. is going to truly confront Iran, or if it even really wants to.

MR. SCHIEFFER: When will Iran begin to get this money? When will their assets begin to be unfrozen?

MR. SANGER: Well, after they do that list of things that I laid out before, then the president is supposed to sign a series of orders that lift, but do not eliminate, the sanctions. And that tells you what the seed is for potential problem in the future. The Iranians believe that at some point in this agreement Congress is going to have to step in and actually vote to terminate sanctions that they voted for during the Bush administration and during the Obama administration.

None of us know what Congress is going to look like in the next few years, but that's a really tough vote. Can you imagine, you know, you're thinking that you're up for reelection in the next year or two and you're going to vote to lift the sanctions on Iran – you can sort of hear the TV ad ringing in the back of your head, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, on that. So at some point the Iranians might say you haven't completed the rest of the formal lifting of the sanctions.

The other thing that's going to go on I think Margaret alluded to when she talked about all of these other sanctions that may get put in place for links to terrorism, for other activities. And the Obama administration and its successor is going to have to make it very clear that they're not simply taking sanctions that were previously called nuclear related and relabeling them terrorism related and re-imposing them, because if they do the Iranians are going to say you're violating the spirit of this agreement and so can we.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You were talking about spending more on cyber. Do you think that's where they will concentrate spending this new money that they'll have coming in? Or do you think that they're going to be forced to spend some of it on infrastructure, things of that nature? Or where do you think they'll spend this money?

MR. SANGER: They're definitely going to spend a fair bit on infrastructure, because they've got to show the people that they've got something for this. But you know, cyber's cheap. It's a lot cheaper than nuclear.

MS. BRENNAN: Well, Javad Zarif has said publicly – he said to me, he said it to many others publicly – that they had very specific designations for what they're doing to do with the cash, a large part of it being infrastructure and construction. The problem that I'm sure – I think Jay has looked at a lot too, is that a lot of what the IRGC, basically the Revolutionary Guard Commanders, have amassed in terms of power is not just on the military field anymore – on the battlefield, it's also in – within investment in Iraq, within controlling corporations within in Iran, including construction and infrastructure companies, and real estate. There's a lot of real estate that's owned by the IRGC. So it's hard to really draw lines and say, oh, it's just going to go build a new highway here and not go into anyone else's pocket that has ties to something else. It's just not that clear.

MR. SOLOMON: Yeah, the economics I think are really interesting, because in some ways the Iranians almost you could say this is going to be neutral to them. They're going to get – the U.S. announced it's 50 billion (dollars), other people say 100 billion (dollars) in money unlocked, but the fact that they can put more oil on the market means that prices are probably going to stay down. And if you think about it, when the process started, what was it, it was about 140 (dollars). Now it's down to 40 (dollars), or whatever it is. So their economy is still really hurting.

And to me, one of the – to me, one of the biggest criticisms I had of the negotiating – kind of the process, is I think we had so much leverage over them economically, and we kind of let it diminish through the process in a way that I don't think we needed to, because the sanctions on the financial side were holding. I mean, you couldn't get a bank – you still can't get a bank to touch Iran. And with oil going from 140 (dollars) to 40 (dollars), there was that much less desire from other countries to go into Iran because they didn't need the oil. So that's probably going to be part of the history books.

But I think economically the fact that oil's depressed is going to be a problem for Rouhani. And as Margaret was saying, the Revolutionary Guards are the most dominant military, but also economic player in Iran. And the U.S. sanctions, even if everything that we've

talked about get lifted, our sanctions remain on the Revolutionary Guard with extraterritorial power, meaning if you're a French company and you're doing a – you know, you're building a highway with the IRGC, we're still technically supposed to sanction you. And that's going to be a problem.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I'm going to go to the questions from you all, but while you're thinking I want to just touch on this while I have these great people here. The situation in North Korea right now, if someone would like to comment on exactly what they think is happening there, and the Russian – the latest Russian moves in Syria. Who'd like to talk about either of those?

MR. SOLOMON: Do you want to take North Korea?

MR. SANGER: I'll take a first shot on North Korea. You know, the great irony as we've been doing the Iran negotiations here is the North Koreans have actually been speeding ahead, we're not entirely sure how fast, in their own production facilities. And all you need to do is look at the satellite photographs of the main production site at Yongbyon and you see considerable construction going on. And it doesn't look like it's for additional cafeterias.

So the estimates about what number of weapons the North Koreans will have over the next few years or by 2020 vary dramatically from sort of 20 at the low end to 100 at the high end. But you know, there's probably something in the middle there that is about right. And they're going to combine that with the fact that eventually they're going to figure out how to make an intercontinental ballistic missile. And you know, right now the safest place to be when the North Koreans test a missile is wherever they're aiming it. (Laughter.) But presumably –

MR. SCHIEFFER: It's like my golf game. (Laughter.) If you stand in the middle of the fairway you won't be hit. (Laughter.)

MR. SANGER: But, you know, they're going to figure this out sooner or later. And they may figure it out a little bit with Iranian help, because missile technology is something the two countries have been doing a lot. But so you could imagine that being a significant crisis for the next president.

On the migration issue, the president just announced today – or the White House just announced today that we're going to take upwards of 10,000 of the Syrian refugees. Sounds good, but the – you've already heard from the Germans they're going to take 800,000, which is about 1 percent of their population. If we took 1 percent of our population in Syrian refugees, we'd be bringing in 3 million.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What about the Russians in Syria?

MR. SOLOMON: I mean, it does seem like they're kind of ramping up their military presence in kind of the area of the stronghold of President Assad, which is on the coastal region around a town in an area called Latakia. I think the big question, and it's still unclear, is this Putin getting ready to sort of start doing an air campaign against ISIS to support the Assad

regime, kind of in collaboration with the Iranians who have their military advisors and troops there, and thousands of Hezbollah fighters? Or is this more of a – kind of a political game where Putin kind of recognizes that Assad is weak, but they want to sort of bolster him as part of some negotiating chip for what is the future?

I think there's a lot of concern, though, that the Russians are really going in there heavily to sort of bolster Assad, to bring in the Iranians in sort of an alliance to bolster him. And it's kind of – this buildup we're seeing around Latakia seems as the beginning of that process.

MS. BRENNAN: Or at least to bolster the regime, if not Assad. We do hear constantly, oh, you know, they're not in love, they're not wedded to Assad himself, but they are wedded to the, you know, security state that is the Assad regime. And it seems like at a very minimum having this military presence in a more significant way will give Russia a vote. You know, it'll create a fact on the ground that creates a lot more leverage than just diplomatic talk.

And that's one of the really difficult things when you hear, you know, the assignment John Kerry's trying to pull off here, with calling Sergei Lavrov for the second time in five days to say, you know, we really don't like what you're doing. Well, talk doesn't necessarily stop that behavior. If it did, it would have stopped it at the first phone call. And that's a problem, is if you have diplomacy without pressure. And Putin has now said, well, I'll keep talking to you with the diplomacy, but I'm going to put a little pressure here.

And so it's going to be interesting to see how it plays out. It doesn't seem like anyone's got a clear view on what the full Russian game is. But they've certainly indicated they're going to put their thumb on the scale.

MR. SOLOMON: I think people think, too, Putin sees this refugee crisis happening that's infecting Europe out of Syria, and believes, probably rightly, that the Europeans – this kind of strong stance that you've got to go, Assad, which came from Washington as well, is diminishing as refugees start flooding into the heartland of Europe, and that Putin knows that he has a much stronger card now to play with his – you know, Moscow's long-time ally, which is the Assad family.

MS. BRENNAN: Right, I think the line is Assad has no future now, no longer Assad must go. That language has changed.

MR. SCHIEFFER: That's a very interesting point.

All right, questions. Tell us who you are. Sir, right here.

MS. BRENNAN: And the microphone?

MR. SCHIEFFER: You're the man. (Laughter.)

Q: Thank you very much. My name is Paolo von Schirach, Schirach Report here in Washington, D.C.

I think it was you, Ms. Brennan, who alluded to, in the early part of the conversation about the non-nuclear components of the – sort of the implications of the deal. And it seems to me, from what I see, if we look at the traffic in Tehran immediately after the U.N. vote on the deal, Federica Mogherini of the EU went there, also the French foreign minister went there, the British went there – reopened their embassy. It seems to me that now the nuclear deal has become sort of a metaphor for Iran being re-legitimized. So now they're OK. They're OK people because they signed the deal, they said their good people, they're not going to do the nuclear weapons.

And therefore, hey, let's all go have a party, let's all enjoy ourselves, and let's reestablish trade relations, et cetera. Do you think, all of you here on this panel, that this is actually what's going on, and that essentially this train has left the station, whatever the U.S. Congress may or may not deliberate later on, or just try to block, or subvert, dilute, whatever? That this has already happened and that whatever the U.S. foreign policy direction may go with this president, with another president, already Iran has acquired a new place in the international community, in particular vis-à-vis Europe? What is your opinion? Thank you.

MS. BRENNAN: I would say we're a long way from normalization, per se, but what you described is a really important point, because when you talk to Iranian diplomats, what you just laid out and what you just described, this coming in from this cold, this – not necessarily embrace, but at least no longer keeping them estranged from the international community is hugely important symbolically, and for all the economic reasons, political reasons that you heard elsewhere.

And you know, it's almost a joke among diplomats when you sit and you talk to Iranian officials, you've got to first listen to this long line of complaints and this long history lesson on how proud and how important and what this great history they have is. And in some ways, symbolically, it does resonate, certainly with the Iranian public, that they are being brought back in, that that is being recognized. What it all adds up to long term, who knows?

But certainly – you also had the Austrian foreign minister there, I think last week. You've had a string of European officials. And some American diplomats will say to you, eh, they're looking more at their pocketbooks than they are at the politics and that's what it's really about. We'll see.

MR. SOLOMON: I mean, I personally feel – the White House has said, well, we have this snapback provision, that if they're cheating these sanctions will snap back. I think it's ludicrous. And if you really look at the sanctions, there are only – there are really three that hurt them, that only were in place for about 18 months. We sanctioned their central bank. The EU put in an oil embargo. And the Iranians were kicked off the SWIFT banking system. I mean, there were a lot of other sanctions, but if you really look at what hit the Iranians, it was those three measures.

And I don't know how you could get those back in place. I think it would be really difficult and it's not going to happen like that. I mean, I wouldn't underestimate how hard it's

going to be to do business in Iran. I think it's probably much harder than people realize. And I'm personally skeptical that the supreme leader really wants some huge flood of money into his system. I think he probably sees that as a threat as much as the sanctions. But this idea of snapback to me – I know how hard it was to get those sanctions in place. And it took so much pressure and Iran doing incredibly stupid things to get them in place. I think it would be very hard to do that again.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Do you have any thoughts on that?

MR. SANGER: The only one is this: That it was clear from those of us who were out covering the last two rounds of this Lausanne and then Vienna, that the Russians, the Chinese, and to a lesser degree the Europeans, were done with the sanctions part of this. And when President Obama said, look, this sanctions regime isn't going to hold – if you're living in the fantasy that we could have just held out and come back later on and tried to negotiate something tougher – they were finished. And the evidence of this is that there's only one country among the six that were negotiating with Iran in which this deal has been even remotely controversial – and it's here. It hasn't been controversial in London. It hasn't been controversial in Paris. Certainly not in Moscow and Beijing, and not in Berlin.

So what's that tell you? That Jay's right. Reconstituting this would be very difficult. But probably it was going to fall apart within the next year or so anyway. And so I think the president made a calculation that he was going to have diminishing returns here and he ought to strike the deal when he can.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yes, ma'am.

Q: Thank you guys so much for taking this question. Dr. Sherice Nelson from Howard University. My question for you is that even the slight opening of markets, would that give us the opportunity to gather other intelligence? So you've presented the opposition to the IAEA and all the other mechanisms – the formal mechanisms to track what's going on. Would the slightest opening of the economic market provide us an opportunity to get secret intelligence into the field so that we could gain information that way? Thank you.

MR. SOLOMON: I mean, that's an interesting question, because if you – part of the reason the Iranians are so – or they say they're so hesitant to let the IAEA or any of these other agencies into their country is that they're basically fronts for Western intelligence agencies. So yeah, I do think – as David was saying – if we have 10 years of monitors and inspections, we're going to have a better sense of their – certainly of their nuclear program.

Yeah, I mean, if the economy opens significantly, yeah, we'll have a much better understanding of that country. But that's why I'm still – I'm pretty skeptical how much – how quickly this place is going to open up. I don't – I think they're going to be very kind of – they want the money back so they're off the brink of having a financial crisis, but I'd be skeptical if it really opened up in a way that, you know, companies are flooding in there the way that they hope to.

MR. SANGER: The Iranians are highly aware that before sanctions the trade that they did have allowed in a lot of sabotage. They went out years go to buy power supplies that sit underneath their centrifuges. And I think they were buying them in Turkey. And the power supplies took a brief unexplained detour to Los Alamos. (Laughter.) And when they came back and the Iranians flipped them on, it's astounding that some of the centrifuges blew up. I have no idea how that happened. (Laughter.)

And then later on, as Olympic Games got going, which was the code name for the cyberattacks on them, one of the big entry points were Iranian companies that were buying a lot of things abroad, whose engineers were going abroad, and who either wittingly or unwittingly ended up picking up cyber viruses, malware, that made its way back into Iran. So the Iranians are aware that the opening of the market is not risk free.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me just inject one question that I should have asked before. So the Congress takes action it took today. It looks like this is going forward. What will our relations with Israel be like from here on in? What happens now?

MR. SOLOMON: It's going to be bumpy. I mean, if you listen to Clinton's speech yesterday, a huge part of it was, you know, the day I'm elected I'm going to bring in the prime minister of Israel, we're going to ramp up arms sales to the Israelis, we're going to sell them the latest, most sophisticated weapons. So I think both Clinton and the Republican candidates are kind of in some ways who can be most pro-Israel. So I think you'll see a position on that. But it's definitely been damaged. And it's – the fight over it in Congress has really made it toxic.

I've never seen – I've never seen a foreign policy issue that went this toxic, and just the way it played on the U.S.-Israel relationship, it was almost as if you were against the deal, you must be some Zionist spy. If you're for the deal, you know, you're not a supporter of the state of Israel. So I think the wounds are going to be there. But I think – I think that the nastiness of the relationship is probably somewhat unique to the relationship between Obama and Netanyahu. I think if you – if it's Hillary Clinton or Jeb Bush, I don't know what – (laughs) – Donald Trump's views are particularly. (Laughter.) But I would assume the relationship –

MR. SCHIEFFER: They love him. (Laughter.) They're like the Mexicans, they all love him.

MS. BRENNAN: Yeah.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yes.

Q: Chuck Miller (sp).

MR. SCHIEFFER: Hi, Chuck.

Q: The panel had a little difficulty in articulating what the United States strategy is in the region, and particularly through Iran. I was wondering if you can do a better job of telling us what your thoughts are on Iran's strategy in the region, given the players that we have, the

Revolutionary Guard, the supreme leader, and the diplomats who have negotiated this deal. Who's running the long-term strategy in Iran and where is that going?

MR. SOLOMON: It's a good question.

MR. SANGER: You know, if we had a hard time describing the American strategy, imagine how good a job we're going to do on the Iranian strategy. (Laughter.) There's a reason we had a hard time describing the American strategy, because I think the U.S. has been very cautious about describing a broad containment strategy, or even developing one, before they had this deal together, for fear the strategy itself would blow up the deal. And you have to ask yourself a question.

If you hear all the different containment strategies that we've heard, the one that Secretary Clinton described the other day, several that Republican candidates have described in far less detail during their own few comments on this, you have to wonder whether or not those strategies alone would be used by the Iranians as a reason to say that they were backing out of part of the deal in the future. And we simply can't predict that.

But we also have a tendency to assume that our own government is, you know, disorganized and arguing internally, and that the Iranians or the Chinese or anyone else are running like a perfectly well-oiled machine, right? And everything we know about the Iranian government decision-making process, is that it's even more fractured and paralyzed at times than our very own, hard as that is to imagine. (Laughter.)

And so when the supreme leader makes the statements he makes, they are statements, but they aren't often things that are either strategies or something that you can – you can consider to be an actionable item. And you've got to figure that the battle between the foreign ministry in Iran and the IRGC right now, and those who have economic interests that Jay was describing, has got to be a pretty fierce one.

MR. SOLOMON: I think from the Iranian perspective – I was in Tehran last year. And I was in some museum. And it was – they have a map of the Middle East. And the way the Middle East – Bahrain is like the 14<sup>th</sup> province, and part of the UAE is the 16<sup>th</sup> province. I mean, the Iranians seem themselves as the dominant power in the region. And the relationship between the Persians and the Arabs is – I mean, it's really – it is toxic. I mean, it's a bad relationship. And that's why sometimes I wonder, even if you have a moderate leader in Tehran, you're still going to have this conflict between the Arabs and the Persians and the Sunni and the Shia that's not going to go away.

But I think, whether it's the foreign ministry guys or the Revolutionary Guards, they see Iran as the dominant power in the Middle East, certainly in the Levant and the Gulf. They see the – they almost have a condescending view of the Arab states as very backward, and that they're going to be the dominant power. And I personally never saw the Iranians as, oh, we're going to test an atomic bomb next week. I always thought they wanted to have a latent nuclear weapons capability, which gives you much more conventional – you know, you have that

deterrent – and that they would use that to sort of spread their influence in the region. I think that's what they're doing.

I think there was some Iranian official or a parliamentarian who was Beirut in recent months who said, oh, we're now in control of four Arab capitals, Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, and Sanaa. So I think their policy is pretty clear. I think – personally, I think the leader and the IRGC are the guys who are kind of more driving what's happening in Syria and Yemen and Iraq. But I think universally their position is, yeah, Iran is the – is the preeminent power in that – in that region.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Right here.

Q: Yes, sir. My name is Kami Butt. I'm with the Pakistani Spectator.

And given between these two, Iran and al-Qaida, Iran is the, I think, lesser evil. So if we consider Iran lesser evil, then don't you think that Obama has done an excellent job? And if he has done an excellent job, what kind of reaction do you expect, backlash from American-Israeli public affairs, Republican, or Bibi Netanyahu? Can he be more aggressive toward Palestinians? Thanks.

MS. BRENNAN: I'm sorry, your last question was Netanyahu –

Q: What kind of backlash and reaction to do you expect from Bibi Netanyahu, Republican, and American-Israeli public affairs?

MS. BRENNAN: What kind of backlash does the U.S. expect from Israel, broadly speaking? I mean, you've seen a lot of it. It's been quite public. (Laughs.) I think, you know, what U.S. officials would all say is, listen, the security relationship is what it is. Put the politics aside. The defense relationship's there. It's not like Israel's getting less money or less weapons from the United States of America. That has not changed. That's what they'd say to you. So there hasn't been a backlash on that end.

The political discomfort was – actually started with the Obama administration before the Iran deal. That sort of also was one of what Bibi Netanyahu would say is one of the things he didn't think that now I would do in different areas. You know the hit list, so to speak. But I don't think, tell me if you think differently, but I don't think the long-term security relationship has been damaged. I think that the very interesting thing that we'll all be watching and debating for years is, you know, the Obama administration's choice to publicly challenge the Israeli leadership in the way that they have, and had this very open debate.

Q: These two leaders don't like each other, Obama and Bibi Netanyahu. So don't you think that there might be a very strong reaction because Bibi Netanyahu's ego has been hurt and – (off mic)?

MS. BRENNAN: I think there's an election in this country and there's going to be a new president of the United States. And I think a lot of people are betting that this ends soon.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Right here.

Q: Thank you guys for this beautiful panel. This is Salman Al-Ansari, and I'm from Saudi Arabia, a writer and political commentator.

So I think I'm just going to speak about, like, the perspective of Saudi Arabia or, like, the mainstream in Saudi Arabia regarding this deal. We are definitely in support of any deal that would eliminate Iran from having a nuclear weapon. But at the same time, we'd go back to Margaret's point, which is we totally believe that the United States and the international community is focusing a lot – putting a lot of focus on the nuclear deal, without putting enough focus on the support of the militias in the region, for example, Hezbollah and IRGC, and what they do in different countries, and also in Houthis – with the Houthis in Yemen.

And I think one of the main things that we need to identify is the principle. The issue we have in Saudi Arabia and the GCC country is an issue of principle with the United States. We are definitely a very strong ally, but at the same time we have seen the United States to be diverting from its stance by not taking care or crucial steps to eradicate extremism within the Middle East that has been fueled by the militias of Iran. So this is one of the things that I think need to be highly highlighted, if that's correct.

And at the same time, one of the things that we would love to see from the United States to take back its leadership stance. This is something very crucial. And I think Obama has definitely, for my point of view, has succeeded in so many domestic affairs, but in international affairs he has not done enough at all because we have seen how Iraq has been handed to the Iranian in a silver plate. And that in itself is very troublesome for the whole region. So we would love to see the United States to be taking back its leadership stance, and to be strategic when it comes to its relationships with its Middle Eastern allies.

And one of the most important things that we have noticed is that we have seen, like, so many different think tanks in D.C., I think including CSIS, are mentioning a lot about the strategy – the 10 years, 20 years strategy for the United States, which is to go to the far East and neglect somehow the Middle East. We want your point of view on that. What do you think of the strategy of the United States? Do they really want to somehow put the Middle Eastern affairs, like, aside and just focus a lot on the eastern – or East Asia?

MR. SCHIEFFER: Quick answers. (Laughter.) My answer is – my answer is no. (Laughs.)

MR. SOLOMON: I think – I mean, I know –

MR. SCHIEFFER: I think you make a very cogent and a very concise argument. I understand where you're coming from. But I don't think we want to put the Middle East aside.

MR SOLOMON: Yeah. One of the secretary's first speeches was about how much we're going to focus on Asia and the Asian pivot, and then I think 90 percent of his time has

been focused on the Middle East. So I think maybe there's that hope, but it's not happening yet. And just to that other issue, which I think kind of segues into what he was saying, I think there is some perception that, OK, we're going to ally with the Iranians against al-Qaida and these kind of Sunni extremist groups and then we'll put them down.

But kind of backing up what you were saying, I think the fact that the U.S. has kind of disengaged in some ways in Iraq and Syria, they've turned into sectarian wars, which has only fed ISIS and fed al-Qaida in a lot of ways because in a lot of ways they describe their wars as sectarian wars. So it's great to think, oh, we'll just ally with the Iranians and take out these kind of Sunni extremist groups. But when you look at, like, what's happening on the ground, it's much more complicated than that.

MR. SANGER: I think it's easy to conflate two different elements of President Obama's strategy. First, when he came in, he recognized that he had a mandate to get the United States out of some major wars, starting with Iraq, Afghanistan he called a war of necessity. But he ultimately greatly reduced the American presence there as well. And of course, now we've had to go back in a small way into Iraq, and probably the same will happen in Afghanistan.

But that's strategy number one. The Asian pivot was about a reorientation toward an area in which we had underinvested and where obviously the United States has got a lot greater economic future than it does in the Middle East. And this has been the great drama of the Obama foreign policy, which is an effort to go focus on the future, and always getting sucked back into a series of conflicts which the presidents believes are fundamentally rooted in civil wars that he can't affect as much as we would all like to say he could.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Margaret, closing comment.

MS. BRENNAN: I don't think the Middle East will ever allow itself to be ignored.

MR. SCHIEFFER: That's my – that's my –

MS. BRENNAN: I don't think that's a good thing, necessarily. (Laughter.) I just think

—

MR. SCHIEFFER: No, but I think that's the reality.

MS. BRENNAN: I think that's the reality.

MR. SCHIEFFER: We'll always be involved in the Middle East because we have to be involved in the Middle East.

MS. BRENNAN: Yes, I would agree with that. And I also think it's interesting when – I travel a lot overseas and you hear people describe what America wants, what the U.S. wants. I think it's because a lot of these countries and the leadership they have is thinking longer term because they stay for a longer term. We have elections and every, you know, four years, and

who knows what the next foreign policy will be. But certainly Asia is going to be a huge part of it. But the Middle East isn't going to be ignored.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, on behalf of CSIS and TCU, thank you all for coming here.  
(Applause.)

(END)