

The Iran Nuclear Deal and The Threat From American Domestic Politics

Anthony H. Cordesman

Politics are politics, but to paraphrase Tip O'Neill, "all politics have become partisan, self-seeking, and irresponsible." It is all too apparent that the American people are going to be subjected to the longest, most expensive, and most painful Presidential campaign in history, and will have to suffer at least through November 2016. A minority of polarized political activists in each party will ensure a flood of negative campaigning, half-truths and irrelevances, and a rising popular contempt for the American political process.

The coming weeks are going to be a brutal demonstration of how destructive this can get. The national budget and every major aspect of governance will be at risk as the Congress fights over partisan position taking. National security will be at risk because it depends on a rational budget process and not shutting down the government. So, however, will the effort to put an end to Iran's nuclear weapons efforts, and to establish a credible U.S. approach to the broader security issues in the Middle East.

What promised to be a straight up political vote over disapproval of the Iran nuclear agreement—or [Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#)—now seems to have shifted into a division within the Republican side of Congress over whether Congress should try to block the JCPOA on the grounds that not every possible provision has been fully disclosed to Congress.

This power struggle is based on a more or less meaningless conspiracy theory approach to the fact that the exact nature of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection effort is kept confidential because knowing some details of the inspection effort and its focus it could provide "how to build a bomb" data to other proliferators. It has turned the Republican side of the debate into a fight that can do nothing to keep Iran from getting the bomb, tries to discredit the practical conservatives in the Republican Party—including the leaders of the Senate and House.

The real world outcome of this battle is already clear. The votes don't exist in either the House or Senate to block the Iran nuclear agreement, but the debate can block Congressional action that would be in the national interest. What would have been a short political battle that might have allowed the Congress to shift to a focus on doing everything possible to enforce the terms of the JCPOA and make it work, will end up further polarizing and dividing the Congress. At the same time, it will raise more questions about the credibility of U.S. leadership and ability to conduct an effective national security effort in the Middle East and the world.

Put bluntly, the effort to pick a sudden new fight over the legality of the JCPOA seems likely to become yet another demonstration that partisan struggles within the Republican or Democratic Parties can become even more decoupled from the U.S. national interest than the partisan struggles between the two parties.

The JCPOA is far from perfect, but at least for the next 10 years, full enforcement could put severe limits on Iran's ability to proliferate, and in the real world, arms control agreements need to be updated and renegotiated over time. There is no practical current

alternative to the JCPOA in the short term, and the United States would have no support from the other members of the P5+1 or Security Council if the more extreme opponents of the JCPOA in Congress did somehow find a legal way to block U.S. support of the agreement.

There is, however, a clear need for the United States to show that it has bipartisan political unity in demanding that the agreement be fully implemented, and that the many areas that require new approaches to its implementation will be dealt with quickly and effectively. There is a need to show that the United States is both unified and truly serious about restoring sanctions against both Iran and any country or company that violates the agreement. There is a need to show that Iran will face a major ongoing U.S. intelligence effort to detect any violation, support the IAEA, keep the Congress informed, and provide the evidence to push other countries to enforce the agreement.

There is also a broader bipartisan need to show Iran – and allies in the Arab world and Israel – that the United States will preserve its military options and be willing to provide extended deterrence if Iran does move towards building and deploying nuclear weapons. There is a clear bipartisan need to make it unambiguously clear that we will support our allies in deploying effective missile defenses to deal with Iran's conventional missile threats, and maintain a strong naval and air presence in the Gulf region to ensure that Iran cannot use its asymmetric naval, air, and missile warfare capabilities to halt the flow of petroleum to the global economy.

There is an equal need for bipartisan efforts to keep Israel strong and build-up the military forces of our Arab security partners so Iran understands that it has no other credible military options to threaten them. There is a need to counter Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen and over Shi'ites in other countries.

These are all critical national interests that the Congress should be focused on, and act to ensure the Obama Administration and its successors fully address. They are all areas where the right kind of partisan challenges to any failure to implement effective U.S. policies and actions could serve the national interest and be a legitimate part of the kind of politics the United States should have instead of the divisive posturing it has today.

Conservatives, liberals, and moderates all have an important place in such an effort, and legitimate reasons to differ and debate, but only to the extent this serves the national interest. Unfortunately, it is political ambition, partisan posturing and polarized extremism which now seems far more likely to block effective action to try to make the JCPOA work as well as far too many other critical issues through what now promises to be some 13 more months of a political campaign season from hell.

Detailed analyses of the steps needed to properly implement the JCPOA, and how the Congress could play a constructive role, are available at: The Iran Nuclear Agreement: Beyond Partisan Infighting, http://csis.org/files/publication/150819_Iran_Nuclear_Agreement_Beyond_Partisan_Infighting.pdf; and The Iran Nuclear Agreement: The Need for a Full U.S. Implementation Plan, http://csis.org/files/publication/150824_iran.pdf.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2015 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.