

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran: Assessment and Prospects

U.S. Global Engagement, Ethics in Security Bulletin

**Gary Sick, David C. Speedie**

### Transcript

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** I'm David Speedie, director of the program on U.S. Global Engagement here at the Carnegie Council, and this is another in our occasional series of Ethics in Security Bulletins.

Today, we are delighted to have as our guest Dr. Gary Sick. Gary is a senior research scholar at Columbia University's Middle East Institute and an adjunct professor at the School of International and Public Affairs. He was a captain in the U.S. Navy with service in the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, and he then served on the National Security Council under presidents [Ford](#), [Carter](#), and [Reagan](#).

Most significantly for this broadcast, he was the principal White House aide on Iran during the [Iranian Revolution](#) and the subsequent [hostage crisis](#). From 1982 to '87, Professor Sick served as deputy director for international affairs at the Ford Foundation, where he was responsible for programs relating to U.S. foreign policy. He's a member emeritus of the Board of Human Rights Watch in New York, and founding chair of its advisory committee on the Middle East and North Africa.

He is the executive director of [Gulf/2000](#), an international online research project on political, economic, and security developments in the Persian Gulf conducted at Columbia University since 1993, and let me say immediately that many, many of us—indeed most of us in this field—rely on the [Gulf/2000](#) resource very, very heavily for anything on this topic of Iran and the Gulf in general.

Gary, welcome back to the Carnegie Council.

**GARY SICK:** It is always a pleasure to talk to you, David.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Thank you.

Let's jump right in. The [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) was announced just over a month ago, and since then there's been a pretty feverish debate. Is the debate, in your opinion, now on the technical merits of the plan, or is it purely a political discussion at this point?

**GARY SICK:** I really think it has to be said that this is a political issue at this point. It's sort of, which side are you on? Are you willing to support [Obama](#)? How do you feel about the Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#)? And where do you stand with regard to American foreign policy in the Middle East? And it more takes that form rather than anything to do with the technicalities.

In fact, from my perspective, and I think from the perspective of a huge number of specialists in the field and from all aspects, this is a very, very good deal. It's complicated, it's not perfect, but it's a

very good deal, both for the United States and for the nonproliferation community.

So I see it primarily as a political concern.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** It is in fact true, isn't it, that a host of scientists and diplomats who are very knowledgeable and seasoned in this region, over decades in some cases, have signed on. When you have people like, on the scientific side, [Dick Garwin](#), [Siegfried Hecker](#), [Sid Drell](#), [Frank von Hippel](#), it's a pretty formidable array; and likewise on the diplomatic side, yes?

**GARY SICK:** Very true, and not only that, but the agreement was negotiated by [Ernest Moniz](#), who is himself one of the premier specialists on nuclear physics in the world, a professor at MIT, and the secretary of energy, together with the assistance of all the American labs, the nuclear labs, such as Brookhaven, here on Long Island, Sandia out on the West Coast, and so forth. They were all part of this deal, so this has had the attention—undivided attention over a period of almost two years—of some of the top talent in the United States, looking at it from a technical point of view. The people who are arguing with it are just not the same caliber.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** When Secretary [Kerry came](#) to the Council on Foreign Relations, I guess two, three weeks ago now, he made two important points about the impact of the agreement on a possible nuclear weapons ambition, as it were, for Iran.

First, he said that it would block the path to fissile material production necessary for nuclear weapons, either through uranium enrichment or the plutonium process, for at least 10, possibly 15 years, and that the breakout time, as he put it, would go from two to three months to a year. He concluded at that time, basically saying if the deal is not made, that process could start tomorrow. Is that, you think, a valid assessment?

**GARY SICK:** That is absolutely accurate. In fact, when this negotiation began, Iran was really only a matter of weeks from having enough nuclear fissile material to build a bomb if they chose to do so. They, in fact, had had enough material to do that for a period of up to 10 years before this negotiation actually began. This would reduce their stock of nuclear material to far, far less than one bomb.

There's one slightly misleading factor here, and that is, he referred correctly to breakout time, but they chose to define "breakout time" as simply having enough fissile material to be able to build a bomb. Everybody in the business agrees that the actual building of a bomb, testing it, and then actually putting it in a size that would fit on top of a missile, is actually probably another two years after that; but never mind, we've accepted "breakout time" as being the time when they would have enough fissile material, highly enriched uranium, to be able to begin the process of building a nuclear weapon.

That is a very stringent, very tight, and, ultimately, I think slightly misleading approach, because it makes it sound as if they're much closer to an actual weapon than they really are. They have been—they've got something like 10,000 tons of nuclear-enriched uranium at this point, which if they set about enriching it further, they could, within a very, very short period of time, have enough highly enriched uranium to build a bomb. What they will do as a result of this agreement is reduce that to 300 kilograms, which is far, far less than they would need, so that's just part of the deal.

But in fact, the deal—Iran had to accept very, very serious restraints on its system, and those were not easy for Iran to do because they have accepted a set of constraints on their nuclear activity, for at least the next 15 years, that are above and beyond any other country in the world. And they don't like that. Iran doesn't like to be treated as a pariah, as somehow exceptionally dangerous. They have

always insisted on their rights under the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), but in order to settle this deal, they have accepted a series of restrictions that go far beyond any other country in the world, and that will remain true for at least 15 years. Then it begins—it does then taper off from that point on.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** By the way, it is accurate to say that across the political spectrum in Iran there is a strong consensus of Iran's right to what they would describe as a peaceful nuclear program. Is that right?

**GARY SICK:** That's absolutely true. There has also been some grumbling on the part of the real hardliners in Iran. Very recently, the hardline [editor](#) of the principal hardline newspaper, *Kayhan*, has come out and said that the [supreme leader](#) actually doesn't support this thing at all, which is obviously completely false. But also, the supreme leader is a good politician, and he's not going to get out in front, he's going to keep his powder dry, and he's not going to come out and say, "This is my agreement, and I accept responsibility for it." He's going to say, "My negotiators did a good job. They did a good job, but I have my doubts about whether this will actually work." And he's going to keep that position, but nobody should be confused by where he actually stands. They could never have signed this agreement without his direct support.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** That's interesting because I was going to ask you about this later, the [opinion piece](#) that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* blog today by [Haleh Esfandiari](#) in Washington that reported this stated opposition from the supreme leader. But what you're saying, essentially, is to some extent he's hedging his bets, is that it?

**GARY SICK:** I think very clearly so, yes.

Throughout this process, he has done two things. One, he has set a series of red lines, which then he quietly gave up on—he removed those red lines as time went on. And two, he has repeatedly proclaimed that you can't trust the United States, that they can't be trusted to do a deal, they can't be trusted to keep their word, that they will cheat. It sounds very familiar, if anybody's listening to American politicians talking about Iran, because they're saying exactly the same thing about Iran.

But he says all of those things, and at the same time meets with the negotiating team, was in fact in touch with them, I think, literally minute by minute as this negotiation was going on. And if you listen to all of the people around Khamenei, not Khamenei himself, they are very strongly in favor of the deal and it's very clear that this was done with his support.

But he is not going to take full personal responsibility for it. If something goes wrong, if the United States backs out, if the U.S. Congress refuses to accept it, if something else happens where Iran is punished for doing something they don't think was wrong, he's not going to be held responsible for it. He will say, "Well, that was negotiated by my negotiating team, not by me." And that's just good politics in Iran.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Sort of an "I told you so" type thing.

**GARY SICK:** Exactly right.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Well, again, that's interesting. Since we're on this track, just to wrap it up in a sense, I remember hearing [Hossein Mousavian](#), whom you know well and who's now, of course, based at Princeton but was a negotiator in the negotiations, I guess, just about a decade ago—he [spoke](#) about how there are [two U.S.'s in this and two Irans](#). And by the two U.S.'s, of course, he meant the [administration](#) and the Congress, and by the two Irans, he meant the negotiating team in

Geneva and some of the hardliners back home. But essentially you say that the supreme leader is the supreme leader, the hardliners basically will follow his lead.

**GARY SICK:** They will, and the key thing here is the [head](#) of the [Revolutionary Guard](#) came out formally endorsing the agreement the other day, and, you know, there's no possibility that the head of the Revolutionary Guard would endorse the agreement unless he was absolutely certain that the supreme leader was behind him on that. I think we should not get alarmed when—I don't think the Iranians should get alarmed when they hear Senator [Menendez](#) or Senator [Corker](#) talk about this deal and how they can't possibly support it, and how any Republican president would come along and do away with it. I think Iranians shouldn't be alarmed when they hear that, and we shouldn't be alarmed when you don't hear the supreme leader coming out and praising it in unqualified terms.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Are the Iranians alarmed by what they're hearing from what Hossein Mousavian said, the second America?

**GARY SICK:** They seem to be keeping quiet. There has not been a huge outcry in Iran saying, "Look what these Americans are saying. Look at the fact that you can't really trust them, that they've done an agreement as a nation, and now you have the whole Republican party saying that they're out to destroy this." As far as I can tell, Iran is aware that these things are going on, but they seem to have kept it in perspective.

So as far as I can tell, it looks very much as if the administrations on both sides, the Obama administration here and the [Rouhani administration](#) there, with the backing of the Supreme Leader, are basically planning to go ahead with this, and I think they're looking at it as a deal that has been done.

But one of the things that I think everybody needs to be reminded about all the time is that this was not an Iranian-American negotiation. It was really done with the backing of all the permanent members of the Security Council and the European Union, and that included, of course, China and Russia.

The fact that the Russians stayed with this all the way through, despite [Ukraine](#), despite all the other problems, that the Chinese stayed with it despite their obvious discomfort sometimes of meddling in other countries' internal affairs, is to me a huge vote of confidence with this, that if they would see this through from beginning to end and not walk away from it, not back away, and basically let this extraordinarily complicated piece of negotiation be worked out and then sign on to it, as they formally have done. That is an astonishing accomplishment, and I must say I give full credit to President Obama and particularly to our Secretary of State John Kerry. I just think this was one of the extraordinary pieces of diplomacy in American history, and I think ultimately, after all the noise dies down, it will be seen that way.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** If I may turn the record back a minute or two, Gary, on the technical details and so on. Along with what I call the regular, routine IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection process here, there's what's called the "additional protocol." What, briefly, does that mean as far as Iran is concerned?

**GARY SICK:** The additional protocol is a separate agreement that countries are encouraged to sign, which provides for much more rigorous inspection than just the rules that were set up in the original installment of the IAEA and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran had accepted those in the past, but then after they came under attack for their activities and the Security Council voted sanctions on them, they said they would not obey the additional protocol.

Part of the deal here is that they will accept the additional protocol—by the way, United States has not accepted the additional protocol. We don't let people have access to our security system and our nuclear facilities the way we're requiring Iran to. But Iran is required to ratify this; not just to say that they accept it but to ratify it. And that is permanent. There is no way to un-ratify an agreement of that magnitude. So once Iran accepts that, they understand that very well.

And I think that raises one additional point that I think is really important to make, and that is that these extraordinary measures that Iran has accepted, the immediate access to all of their mining activities, all of their milling activities, all of their labs that are actually producing centrifuges, minute-by-minute access via camera and private inspection to all of their nuclear sites, and a promise not to create any new sites. So the establishment even of a covert site would be breaking this deal, and it would bring it down and snap the [sanctions](#) back in place. Those extraordinary circumstances stop within 15 to 25 years. But the high level of inspections, which is what is carried out with regard to Japan, which has a huge amount of plutonium, and lots of other countries in the world, will remain forever.

So although the extraordinary measures end within 15 to 25 years, the additional protocol and its intense inspection regime will remain forever. And Iran knows very well that that's what it's accepting. So this idea that somehow the supervision of Iran's nuclear program suddenly ends in 10 or 15 years is just wrong. I mean it just isn't true. But Iran will have the same kind of coverage at the end of 10 to 15 years that, say, Japan does, or Sweden does, or Brazil does today, and that is what the international community believes is adequate to ensure that a country does not begin to use peaceful nuclear material for military purposes, and that's what the IAEA is responsible for doing.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Some of the skeptics on this side have seemed to *post facto* [after the fact] extend the parameters of the negotiations, as it were, perhaps even move the goalposts a little bit, that we should have brought in Iran's military facilities in general, the support for [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#). But it's true, this was always just a negotiating process over the nuclear question. Is that correct?

**GARY SICK:** That's really true. I mean, this whole process was quite complicated, and the technical part of it is really extraordinary. But if we had tossed in all the political issues, Iran's treatment of political prisoners, or its activities with regard to Assad, or any number of other things that could be raised, if we had tossed that into the mix, there would have been absolutely no possibility of getting an agreement, and I think everybody involved understood that. Whether we like it or not, this is an agreement about Iran's ability to produce a nuclear weapon. That is all that it's about.

Then, two things have happened here. First of all, Iran has accepted that and has accepted great restrictions on its activities, but at the same time the United States and other countries have placed a set of expectations about Iran's behavior that are based on more than just hope. We have now had [two years of intense negotiation](#) at the highest level with Iranian officials. They have accepted an [agreement](#) 18 months ago, almost two years ago, and they have been meticulous in keeping their word about that.

We have seen pictures of Foreign Minister [Zarif](#) sitting down with Secretary Kerry and spending days and days discussing this issue almost nonstop, taking breaks only for a little bite to eat, or sometimes to get two or three hours' sleep. But it was an extraordinary thing. You've got to remember that until this started, American diplomats had not sat down personally with high-level Iranians, certainly not for any extended period over any substantive issues for almost 36 years, so this has in fact changed things.



I mean, just the sheer fact that Americans and Iranians are beginning to get accustomed to the idea that they can in fact talk to each other is a new factor, and that doesn't prove that either Iran or the United States is going to behave better in the future. We don't know that. Within the time period of these extraordinary agreements, the extraordinary constraints on Iran with 15 years, let's say, the United States could have two, even three, different presidents, and trying to predict what that would be is impossible.

Iran, I can make one prediction, I think, and that is that the supreme leader will no longer be running the show. Somebody will have replaced him, or something will have replaced him in the meantime. The point being he's now getting on toward 80, and I think in 10 or 15 years it's very unlikely that he will still be in charge.

But that being said, we don't know what that means. We don't know what the United States is going to look like politically in 10 or 15 years. We don't know what Iran's going to look like. But they have accepted an agreement. They have shown their willingness and ability to keep their word, and we'll see.

But it opens up the possibility of a different type of relationship than we have had in the past, and from my perspective as somebody who suffered through the hostage crisis and has followed the politics of U.S.-Iran relations for the past nearly four decades, I really welcome that. I think it's a breath of fresh air for us to be able to deal with Iran more directly and basically discuss the issues that separate us, not just shout at each other over the airwaves, but in fact discuss what those issues are. And we're at a point where that is not unthinkable now.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Once again, you've foreseen a question I was going to put, which was that if one has a positive note on this, does the agreement as implemented have the benefit of at least creating an atmosphere of dialogue that hasn't existed, as you say, for 36 years, and even possible cooperation on issues of mutual concern, which we certainly have—for example, the [narcotics trade in Afghanistan](#), [ISIS](#) [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], and so on, so forth, so I think you've answered that pretty clearly. I mean, this comes up in just a week or couple of weeks period where we've [raised the flag in Cuba](#), so who knows.

**GARY SICK:** I do think that people should understand—everybody who thinks about this should understand—that this is an international agreement, it has been attended to by all the major powers in the world, and that if the United States decides to walk away from this, to break its word officially, and that the American Congress insists that it's going to be our foreign policy—and I say that seriously because that's not their role. But if that turns out to be the case, I think we can anticipate that we're going to find ourselves with Iran in the same kind of circumstances that we had with [Cuba](#). And that is that the rest of the world will say, "Okay, you Americans can go your own way. You can put on sanctions as you wish, but don't look to us to cooperate with you on it, and in the meantime, we're going to do business with Iran." And I think that's going to happen, and I think that there's absolutely nothing that the U.S. Congress can do that's going to stop that.

So in many respects, if we break our word and leave the agreement, we are going to end up with the worst of all possible worlds. We will have given up the possibility that we have of actually working in a constructive way with Iran. We will be putting ourselves and all of our companies at a disadvantage, because we will undoubtedly keep heavy sanctions, but the rest of the world won't. So our companies will be under restrictions not to do business in Iran, but companies all over the rest of the world will be able to do so. Iran will then have no compunction at all about—they can say that this agreement is off, I mean, that it's broken, that they have no restrictions. They don't have to follow

those extraordinary rules that they've been willing to accept, and we're back to where we were before—that is, that Iran would be within a few weeks of having enough highly enriched uranium to be able to build a bomb.

And so, in effect, we would have gained nothing, and we would have sacrificed hugely with regard to American credibility. And I think people must really understand that. This is not a minor thing, and it's not a matter of a temper tantrum here or there. This is really important. It's important to the future of American foreign policy, and I hope that people who are thinking seriously about this really do understand that those are the stakes.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Again, just one more argument from the skeptics' side, and one that has had some traction, certainly, is the argument that added revenue from sanctions relief, which, of course, Iran gets from this deal, could result in more robust support for regional terrorist activities—again, Hamas, Hezbollah. Where do you come down on that?

**GARY SICK:** Well, that is Iran's money. It is the proceeds of oil sales that they have made over the years, and basically if we break the agreement, if we say that we walk away from this, Iran's going to get the money anyway. So, basically, there's no way that we can force governments all over the world to sit on Iran's frozen assets at a time when in fact we had an agreement with them, which the U.S. Congress broke. Keeping everybody else in the world in line to do the bidding of the U.S. Congress is, I think, asking too much, and I think that they're kidding themselves. Anybody who really believes that we can do that is wrong.

So they're going to have that money, but you also have to understand that Iran has an enormous overhang of needs, domestically, for its own economy. And Mr. [Rouhani](#) was, in fact, [elected](#), and one of the reasons why he was elected was that he [promised](#) that he would deal in a more efficient way with Iran's economy than Mr. [Ahmadinejad](#) had, and part of that was going to be through foreign policy, but the other part was going to be domestic management. He has, in fact, improved the Iranian economy during this period of time, even when sanctions were very severely in place. Is he going to take all of that money that Iran gets, which is substantial, but we're talking 50 billion dollars, which in a gross national product of Iran's, it's significant, but it doesn't, in fact, change the world suddenly. They're going to take that money, they could take it all and spend it in Syria.

But I think the Iranian people, who actually have a say in this, would not accept that, and they're going to be watching that very closely. So if he does want to do that, for reasons—I mean, why he would want to do that, I don't understand, in fact, because Iran has been supporting its allies in Syria and in Hezbollah over the past number of years, even when sanctions were in place. It's not clear to me that an additional fraction of money is going to dramatically change their policy one way or the other.

But if he decided to do that, he would be risking his own reelection for sure, and also be risking enormous disappointment on the part of Iranian people who thought they knew that they trusted him to do something, and he has thus far fulfilled their promises. For him to break those promises at this point and take that money that is badly needed for the Iranian economy and for job creation, and to send it off to foreign adventures would certainly—that was one of the reasons why Ahmadinejad was in such trouble and why people were so glad to see him go. Obviously his foreign policy was something we detested, but Iranians had watched his performance with regard to the economy and decided that this guy had to go, and his departure was overwhelmingly voted on.

So, I do think that this argument is one that we should not close our eyes to or ignore. On the other

hand, if we can do anything to encourage Iran to use its money more responsibly, that could include sitting down with Iran to talk about what goes on in [Syria](#), what kind of an agreement, what kind of a negotiated settlement could be reached. That, it seems to me, would go a long way to convincing Iran that it didn't need to spend that money elsewhere. But that remains to be seen, and that's for the future to decide.

But either way, my guess is that that additional money is not going to make much difference as far as the actual performance of either [Assad](#) or Hezbollah, and if he misuses it, from the point of view of his own constituency, he's obviously going to pay a very high price for it.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Finally, Gary, I was going to ask you two really sort of almost one-word answer questions, and you've already answered one. One was, end of the day, is this a good deal?

But the second part was, will it come to pass? Is it going to make it most likely through a presidential veto, but is that the endgame?

**GARY SICK:** We shall see. I don't like making—there's no reason to make a prediction. We will know within a month whether the Congress has enough votes to pass a bill of a resolution of disapproval, which would then go to the president. If you look at the vote count as it stands today, it's not entirely clear that there's enough votes in the Senate or the House to, in fact, carry through a vote of resolution in the first place. And if you look at the vote count, it's even more likely that a presidential veto would not be overwritten. It's hard to find the votes to where that would happen.

Just one little technical note, the way this is set up, the House of Representatives will vote first, so if the House votes and is unable to pass a bill, which could happen—nobody's predicting that, but it could happen—that's it. It's all over because it wouldn't go to the Senate, there would be no Senate vote, there would be no presidential veto. That would end the whole thing. That is, I think, unlikely, but I think people should realize that the number of Democratic votes in the House of Representatives could, in fact, determine the outcome of the whole thing, before anything else goes to the Senate and certainly the president.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** I can't end without asking you, Gary, if you can estimate how many posts, submissions you've received on this over the past month on Gulf/2000.

**GARY SICK:** [Laughs] I would not even—I mean I could go back and count, I guess, but—

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** You told me before we went on the air that you've had a few vacations this summer. I must admit that given what we've received from you, I'm both pleased and surprised.

**GARY SICK:** Yeah, well, fortunately or unfortunately, Gulf/2000 is a virtual operation, which travels wherever my computer is. As long as I've got a wifi connection, I can do it.

But you're right, of course, we've been sending out an enormous number of postings. It's slowing up a little bit. I think the fact that the battle lines have sort of been drawn, most people have said what they have to say.

One of the interesting—one final thing in terms of things that are happening that might not have been anticipated, the people who have been most vocal in opposing this deal, in many cases now, especially the think tanks, are turning their attention to either future amendments of the deal, so that the Congress would say, "Okay, we're going to change the words here and there, or we're going to add to it as time goes on, or we're going to put in caveats as far as enforcement is concerned," or



something of the sort. They're beginning to look at that, which, I think, again, is an indicator of the fact that this is sort of plan B.

The reality is that plan B could go on for a very long time, given the state of the polarization of American politics, the fact that if you look at the example of [Obamacare](#), where even though there was virtually no chance of overturning it in the Congress, they kept voting anyway. And what did they have? Forty-seven votes or something like that, each one coming out the same way.

But it was a very close thing and they kept doing it, and I suspect that we're going to see the same thing. If this passes one way or another, either with or without a necessity of a presidential veto, there's going to be very creative people in the Congress and in the think tanks who are going to be coming in with bright ideas about how you can sabotage it after it's in existence. And I'm sure that there will be no shortage of examples of that. So this spite which is going on, which is a political battle right now, will remain a political battle after it's over, certainly through the remainder of the [presidential campaign](#) period for a year and a half, but potentially beyond that. And I think this is something that all of us should understand and be prepared for.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** To be continued.

Our guest has been Professor Gary Sick, a senior research scholar at Columbia's Middle East Institute and an adjunct professor at the School of International and Public Affairs. Gary, thank you so much for giving us your time this afternoon, and I suspect we may be speaking again.

**GARY SICK:** I would look forward to it as always, and it's been a pleasure, David.

### Audio

Professor Gary Sick, Iran expert at Columbia University and lead White House negotiator during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, assesses the merits of the recently negotiated agreement on Iran's nuclear program and the prospects for the upcoming vote in Congress.

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