

Obama's Iran Deal is Good for America: A Debate

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On Tuesday evening, I attended a debate in New York City sponsored by [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) focusing on whether or not Obama's Iran deal is good for the country. (The podcast is available at the website.)

On the pro side of the debate (for more complete bios on the debaters, visit the iQ2 website) was Philip Gordon, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, former special assistant to the president, and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region. He was joined by Thomas Pickering, currently vice chairman of an international consulting firm but more notable for his time served as a diplomat in various ambassadorships including to the U.N.

The side against the deal was represented by Michael Doran, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute specializing in Middle East security issues and formerly in positions at the State Department, Pentagon, and National Security Council, helping devise and coordinate national strategies on a variety of Middle East issues, and Mark Dubowitz, executive director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and noted expert on Iran, sanctions, and nonproliferation.

The debate itself was lively and informative but also distressing. While this should not necessarily be a partisan issue, what I discovered was that the pro side used lies, straw men, personal attacks, and similar tactics commonly trotted out by liberals and most definitely by the Obama administration.

Round One: Opening Arguments

Gordon opened the debate stating that this agreement will stop Iran from going nuclear and avoid military conflict. He stated that the "alternatives are far worse" and there is "no credible or realistic alternative." He promised that the framework cuts off all paths for Iran to go nuclear including through enrichment, through plutonium, and covertly.

For anyone up to date on the negotiations, you can understand why all I heard was blah, blah, blah.

Michael Doran was next, comparing a deal with Iran to a legitimate businessman entering into an agreement with a Mafioso hoping that the latter will become a law-abiding citizen. He proceeded to

question why anyone would believe that this regime will abide by the agreement, pointing out that the Obama administration never addresses this very important point. From the Obama administration we hear that the 2013 election brought to power Rouhani the Reformer, a legitimate negotiating partner, while our allies point out that the negotiations are due to not a change in Iran, but a strategic change in the U.S. administration that tore up U.N. resolutions restricting enrichment.

Doran's most important point was that the only reason Iran is negotiating is because we're paying it to do so. There is no evidence of a strategic shift in the Iranian regime. They still threaten to annihilate Israel and teach anti-Semitism, they still hold U.S. hostages, and they are still a destabilizing force in the region. Doran concluded that the U.S. is turning Iran into a regional hegemon that will expand further and trigger a nuclear arms race, which does not make the U.S. any safer. A good deal that would make us safe would stop Iran, make our allies feel safe, and stabilize the region.

Next up was the bombastic Pickering. Pickering basically called Doran a liar when he quoted Daniel Patrick Moynihan, stating, "You are entitled to your opinion but not your own set of facts." He denied that the Iranians have been paid off, claiming that funds will be released only upon the satisfaction of certain conditions, and called the accusation that Iran is wreaking havoc in the region "strange and unusual." He touted the strong inspections regimen that will be put in place and concluded that those hoping for zero enrichment on the part of the Iranians must also believe in the tooth fairy. Pickering concluded that walking away would be terrible, Iran would go nuclear in two to three months, and the only alternative would then be military force, which would isolate the U.S. and buy only three to five years.

Finally, Dubowitz, who was superb (when armed with the facts, it is easier to take down your opponent), discussed the "seven deadly flaws" of the deal, which make war more likely, not less:

- It will leave substantial portions of the nuclear infrastructure intact with only a one-year breakout, which, by year 15, will reduce to zero breakout time.
- Obama gave up on sanctions and U.N. resolutions, allowing Iran nuclear enrichment capabilities from the very beginning of negotiations, giving Iran a 1,200% increase in centrifuges from his starting point.
- Iran's ballistic missile program is off the table (ICBMs are designed for one thing: to reach New York City).
- Obama has agreed to allow the heavily fortified Fordow facility to remain in place as a "medical isotope facility" easily converted.
- The sunset clause allows all restrictions to be removed by year 15.
- The verification and inspections regime that was promised to be "unprecedented" is worthless, given that Khamenei said inspections of military bases will be "met with hot lead." Dubowitz pointed out that we missed the nuclear weapons programs of the USSR, China, India, Israel, and

North Korea and underestimated the various aspects of Saddam Hussein's WMD programs, concluding that we basically "have a lousy record."

- The IAEA does not enforce agreements; the U.S. does, and the only way to enforce this agreement is with snapback sanctions. These sanctions will not snap back easily.

Dubowitz then proceeded to describe what a better deal would look like:

- No sunset based on an arbitrary time line
- No long-range ICBMs
- Close Fordow
- Require snap inspections
- Require Iran to come clean on its weaponization programs before a deal is signed
- Use economic leverage of sanctions

One of his most important points was that we should take our time and that there is no rush (more on that in a moment). Dubowitz stated that "Hillary and the Republican contenders are the ultimate snap back."

Round Two: Time to Debate

Continuing his condescending and aggressive tack, Pickering turned to Doran and stated, "Let me offer you facts, not your imagination." Pickering was all bark with no bite, constantly interrupting. Doran responded that he wants an American side that acts like a great power and that will not "give the store away," pointing out our pattern of unilateral concessions.

Dubowitz made a terrific point when he argued that "in geopolitical terms, as in life, 15 years is a blip in time." For some perspective, 9/11 was just 14 years ago. He also pointed out that when you lose peaceful economic leverage, you are left with only military action.

Perhaps feeling a bit left out of the conversation, Pickering once again threw out the tooth fairy and imagination, as if he were the only one living in the real world.

One of the most important revelations of the evening came from Gordon, who admitted that the deal was ultimately just buying a couple of decades of peace – in my view, basically admitting that Obama is buying time until he is out of office and leaving the mess to his successor. Pickering then claimed that "pieces of the deal last forever" and that there is no way to improve it.

Dubowitz once again chimed in with clarity, pointing out that Pickering believes that the "economic seduction" we are offering the Iranians may be terminated in 15 years, but in reality, there is no way snapback sanctions would work, leaving military force as our only alternative.

Pickering's meme for the night was then repeated: there is no alternative, and it's imaginary to believe otherwise.

Dubowitz pointed out that a deal designed to stop proliferation is going to enable it. He questioned the rush to a deal, pointing out that Obama has 18 months left and wants this as his legacy. When Dubowitz mentioned that Clinton or perhaps Rubio might be better suited to deal with this, the audience reacted quite negatively at the mere mention of Rubio (this was the Upper West Side of Manhattan).

Round Three: Closing Remarks

Pickering went first and had nothing of substance to say. He quoted Iran's chief negotiator to the effect that "Ahmadinejad put us in the doghouse," as if Iran had been a peaceful law-abiding country for the decades before Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency. He repeated Iran's threat that if they do not receive relief, they're not coming back to the negotiating table.

Doran compared those on the pro side of the debate to intelligent people who nonetheless invested with Bernie Madoff (a weak analogy in my view). He also raised the error in judgment of Ronald Reagan, Bud McFarland, and Oliver North in the Iran contra scandal to make the case that even those actors hoped to find moderates in Iran. He concluded that the American national security elite are living in a fantasy.

Gordon asked the audience to imagine your president before voting (easy enough) and then made out a case for best- and worst-case scenarios that were not compelling.

Dubowitz described a visit he made to the White House (in the days when they used to invite him). At the beginning of the meeting he was told that no deal is better than a bad deal. Upon leaving, he was told that a bad deal is better than no deal. "A Washington gaffe is when the White House tells you the truth." He concluded that saying that a bad deal is better than no deal is the "fallacy of a false alternative." A bad deal is not the choice. A better deal is.

The voting on the debate was both distressing and encouraging. From where I sat, the audience appeared quite young. Many looked like college students, but there were also many senior citizens. Before the debate occurred, 37% were for the deal, 19% against and 44% undecided. I found that discouraging, given that this debate has been publicly raging for quite some time. The good news is that the side against won due to a greater increase in support. Post-debate, 50% voted for the deal (an increase of 13% and another distressing number, given the vapid and dangerous pronouncements from Pickering and Gordon) but 43% voted against the deal (a 24% increase in support), and 7% remained undecided.

The takeaway in my view is that Americans are uninformed about the realities of what the deal involves and what that means. On a positive note, people were engaged enough to come out and spend almost two hours listening and learning. However, 50% of the people in attendance either didn't learn anything or are too ignorant to understand what they heard. There was simply no way to leave with the knowledge imparted without shaking in your boots that Obama is not only giving away the store, but

putting the entire world in mortal jeopardy for an imaginary legacy. The Iranians are being paid tens of billions of dollars to go nuclear thanks to Barack Obama, aka the tooth fairy.