

How to Win the Iran Argument

By Jennifer Rubin

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In the heart of blue America — New York City — Mark Dubowitz and Mike Doran [debated](#) Philip Gordon and Thomas Pickering on whether the Iran deal is good for the United States. The way these things work is that the side that moves opinion the most from pre- to post-debate polling wins. In this case, Dubowitz and Doran won, moving opinion against the deal from 19 to 43 percent. The deal defenders gained just 13 points (from 37 to 50 percent).

The debate is hugely instructive and entertaining and can be viewed in its entirety, but I will note some high points and try to draw some lessons for future debates in and outside Congress.

Dubowitz set the tone for the debate by listing seven things (he dubbed them the seven “deadly flaws”) that rendered the framework a bad deal. These include leaving Iran with 6,100 centrifuges; “[giving] up on long-standing U.S. policy and multiple UN Security Council resolutions, and they gave Iran domestic enrichment”; allowing Iran’s intercontinental ballistic missile program to continue; allowing Iran to keep Fordow; the sunset clause; incomplete verification and inspection; and oversight conducted by the U.N. Security Council and not the International Atomic Energy Agency. The defenders argued that we haven’t yet given up on some of these issues (just wait!). On disclosure of possible military dimensions, an issue essential for inspection, Dubowitz argued:

Unless you understand what the program was, you can’t monitor it. The fact of the matter is the Iranians have stiffed the IAEA for a decade about this. We have not stood firm on it. We have not forced them to come clean on their past program. And the agreement that we got from them about that is that, yes, they will address that question in the future. I’m willing to bet anything — I’m going to make a prediction right here, Phil. And my prediction is that if this deal is signed, we’re going to give them sanctions relief before they ever come clean on their past program, because they have never ever come clean and they’re not going to let us into military sites.

Pickering began to argue that Iran *had* come clean but was forced to concede its disclosures are still incomplete. In short, Dubowitz made a strong case that the deal is a bad one.

There was then the issue of what else can be done. Aside from the Obama administration’s own assertion that no deal is better than a bad deal, Doran argued: “What I want is an American side that will, A, behave like a great power, and B, not give the store away, that will use the leverage that it has to get the best kind of deal, the kind of deal that Mark described.” The defenders tried to assert we had

not caved again and again, but on this the critics had the upper hand — because of facts. (“I can sit here and I can tell you, with absolute certainty, and I will be correct on this, there has been a pattern of concession, unilateral concession from the United States, and in forcing our partners along. . .”) Later in the debate Dubowitz argued:

The fact of the matter is we should increase the sanctions. We continue to ratchet up the pressure. We didn’t have to stick at zero enrichment, but we could have offered exactly what President Obama offered in the beginning, which was 500 to 1,000 centrifuges. Why the willingness on the part of the United States to continue to diminish our nuclear demands step by step? The fact is that the Iranians fear U.S. escalation dominance. They began in 2003 negotiating the Europeans over 13 years. They only increased their operating centrifuges by 9,500. That’s about 700 centrifuges a year. They increased their program incrementally. They fear escalation dominance. They fear our crippling sanctions. 20:11:56 They fear our military power. . . . And most importantly, we could have stuck to our nuclear demands.

As for the sunset clause, Pickering argued that some of the terms last forever and that Iran has agreed to continued inspections, after all. Doran would have none of it: “You don’t get a couple of decades. You don’t get 10 years, you don’t get 15 years. You have an agreement. You have a Mafioso who’s going to sign an agreement, is going to say he’s going to abide by certain restrictions for 10 or 15 years. But all of the leverage that we have, other than military force, we are giving up on the front end of the — on the front end of the deal. We’re paying them to sign this. We are paying to say that they will be good citizens for 10 or 15 years. And then you’re coming to me and saying that we’ve got this in hand. This is the way — this is the Iran that we’re going to be dealing with for the next 10 or 15 years is not the one that we’ve been dealing with for the last 35.”

And there was some spirited discussion about Iran’s increasingly aggressive and unopposed behavior in the region — evidence, the critics said, of President Obama’s dream of detente with Iran. Pointing to widespread evidence that Iran has not changed its spots, Doran concluded: “There’s a fantasy in the American national security elite that across the Persian Gulf, there is this ally in waiting. And if we just embrace it properly, everything is going to get better.”

The defenders’ argument, summarized by Gordon at the end, goes like this: “We won’t be able to keep the international sanctions coalition together. Iran will start resuming all of those things it stopped doing with the joint plan of action, stockpiling 20 percent uranium, spinning 10,000, 19,000 centrifuges and more, finishing the heavy water reactor at Arak. And at that point, you . . . [either] you acquiesce and let them finish that heavy water reactor and build more centrifuges, or use military force to stop it, which would have all sorts of other consequences in the region.” In other words, it’s this deal or war.

The debate is instructive in a couple of ways. First, the critics made use of the public’s common-sense understanding that Iran is untrustworthy and trying to snooker us. Doran put it this way:

[S]ay you’re a legitimate businessman, and a Mafioso comes and you’re in a little bit of — you’re in a little bit of trouble financially, and he offers you a loan, and you take it, and you tell yourself that this is a temporary thing and that as the Mafioso becomes your partner, over time, he’s

going to moderate, he's going to understand what it's like to get honest profits, and he's going to change, and he's going to start abiding by the law. This agreement would be fantastic if we were making this agreement with Denmark, but we're not. We're making it with Iran. We know Iran well. We've known them for 35 years. We know what they're like. The Iran that we have today is the Iran that we had 10 years ago. It's the Iran that we had 20 years ago. It's the Iran that we had 35 years ago. And that's — that is actually the single most important question that I want to put to you tonight is, why do we think that this regime is going to abide by this agreement? That's the — that is the single most important — the single most important question, and the administration never, ever — never ever talks about it.

Second, just as Israel's prime minister did, the critics laid out an alternative — tougher sanctions to improve the flaws. They made the additional argument that we should wait for a president with more credibility and whose threat of force might be credible. Defenders are forced to argue that we *aren't* getting the deal we wanted and that even though sanctions brought them to the table, more pressure won't change Iran's decision-making. To support them, one is forced to make the untenable argument that Obama's deal is the best we could ever get. Who believes Obama has driven the hardest bargain and used all available leverage? Frankly, no adversary takes him seriously. Critics of the deal should not be embarrassed to say negotiators are deluding themselves. (After all, lead negotiator Wendy Sherman did the same with North Korea.) Given Obama's universal failure in foreign policy, it is fair to say that self-delusion about our adversaries is this administration's defining characteristic.

The debate provides some reassurance that in a civil debate with informed advocates, the flaws of the deal and the alternatives can be made clear. Too bad Dubowitz and Doran aren't U.S. senators.