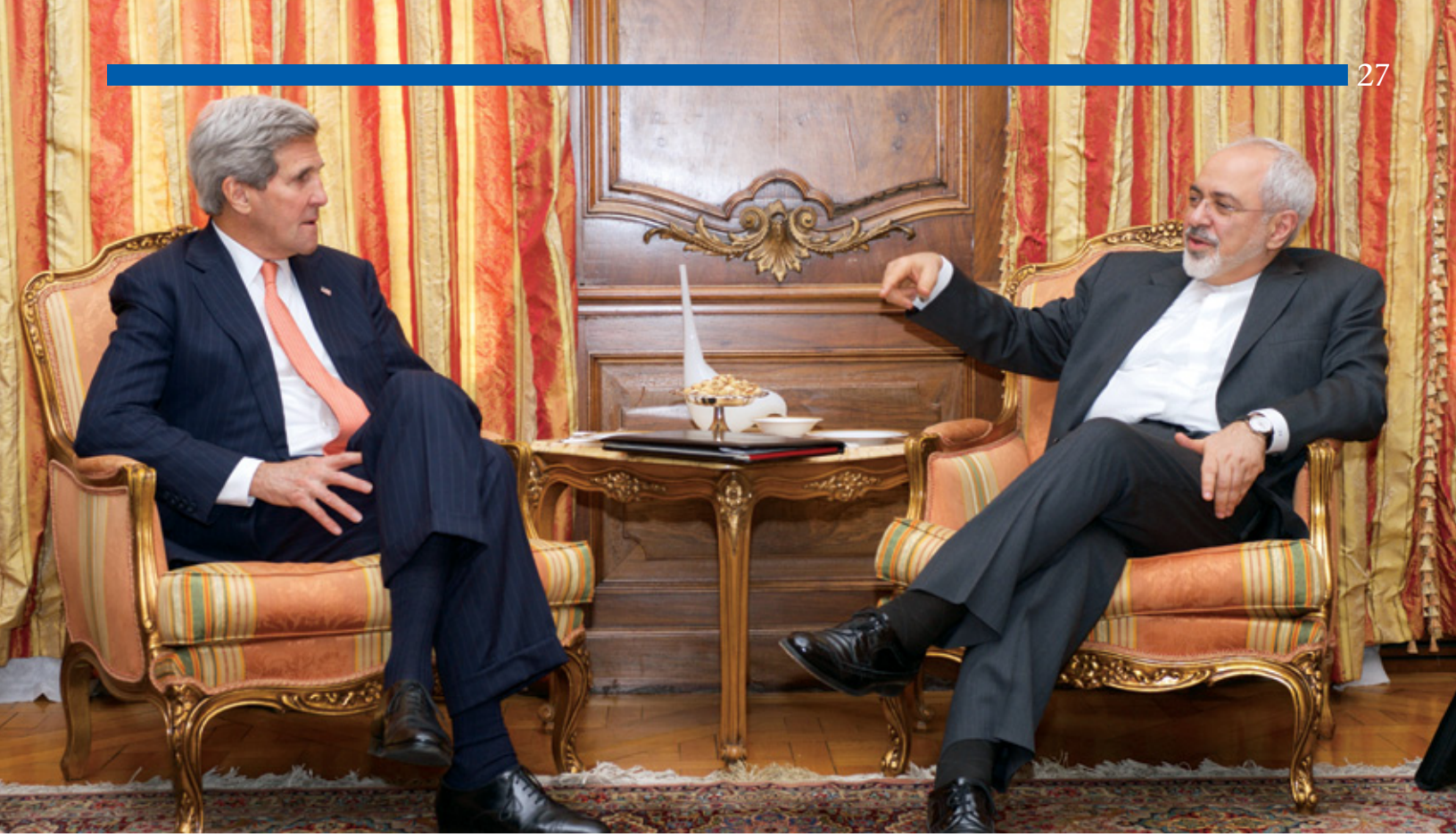

US Secretary of State John Kerry sits with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif as they meeting in New York, New York, on April 27, 2015, for a talk about Iran's nuclear program on the sidelines of their attendance at the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Photo, US State Department

America, Iran and the Fruits of Diplomacy

Jeremy Kinsman

As Winston Churchill famously grumbled, "Jaw-jaw is better than war-war." US and Iranian negotiators have been jaw-jawing about containing Iran's nuclear program for nearly a decade; an investment of time and energy that attests to the exceptional sensitivity of the file, and which, in a war-war scenario, would have cost considerably more in blood and treasure. While the deal is not yet done, the fact that we've come this far, writes former diplomat Jeremy Kinsman, is a triumph of statecraft.

For the first time in years, something other than terrorism, conflict, and disaster has been dominating headlines from the Middle East. The initial outcome of lengthy negotiations between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany to curtail for at least 15 years Iran's capacity to develop nuclear weapons has generated reporting whose technical detail is a news story rarity. Much of the commentary, though, retains the usual flavor of a scoreboard report on winners and losers. For opponents, historical background seldom delves deeper than the cliché of Neville Chamberlain's worn-out appeasement umbrella.

However, history counts; especially the history of conflict surrounding the negotiations. The deal has been 10 years in the making. Throughout, negotiators had to be aware of the effects of decades of conflict and of its reasons, which have not totally disappeared. While parties attempted to get past bad history to make the compromises necessary, reality obliged them to recognize long-standing distrust and insist on unprecedented ironclad verification.

There is a clear winner in this narrative, provided, of course, that the detailed negotiations still to come by the end of June succeed - as President Barack Obama commented, "We're not done yet".

Conflict negotiation has been vindicated as the highest and most essential form of diplomacy, one that circumvents the alternatives of war and drift toward deeper violence and disarray.

The preliminary framework accord concluded April 2 was enabled by secret US-Iran talks over the last few years. Both sides made significant compromises, though everything depends on the final package.

The nuclear issues were treated by expert negotiators as scientific problems to be solved, so that the time necessary for an Iranian nuclear weapons break-out would be stretched to a year, ample warning for preventive action if necessary.

Under this surprisingly detailed agreement, Iran will retain a nuclear infrastructure though considerably reduced. Uranium enrichment levels will be maintained at under four per cent, well below the 20 per cent threshold for highly enriched uranium of weapons grade. The 19,000 Iranian centrifuges will be cut back to about 1/3, all with less advanced technology unsuitable for fast enrichment. No new enrichment facilities will be built for 15 years. But in recognition of the Supreme Leader's promise to Iranians, no nuclear facility will be closed.

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Iran will be subject to the most comprehensive and intrusive international inspections regime in history.

The quid pro quo of the sanctions/embargo regime's removal is less straightforward. The P5 plus 1 argue for a step-by-step removal according to demonstrable compliance, while Iran wants relief as early as possible.

President Obama had broad strategic objectives, apart from a long personal history of interest in reducing the global risk of nuclear war. He needs Iran's constructive engagement for the acutely dangerous and violent Middle East to become a safer place. The long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly established the limitations of military force. Obama knew that only concerted diplomatic negotiation, using leverage, and deploying trade-offs, would work, even—or especially—with an adversary.

Few relationships are as adversarial as that of the US and Iran, with Iran characterized for public consumption as the Evil Empire and the US the Great Satan. There has been plenty of duplicity and destructiveness on both sides since the Iranian Revolution rose against the Shah in 1979 and took US diplomats hostage. The resulting militant theocracy has been hostile to the US and Israel, and a sponsor of terrorism and Shia militias that have fired and fanned the flames of war in the predominantly Sunni Middle-East region ever since. And each time the US or Iran has tried to connect with the other, deepened mutual distrust has run the effort into the ground.

Today, the region is a flaming-mess of failed states and ruinous civil wars caused to some extent by the destructive dislocation of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Military intervention options are unattractive but something has to be done to stabilize conditions. A curious development is that long-time antagonists Iran and the US now find they share this purpose as well as a common enemy. Both Iran's former enemy Iraq, fractured but partially under more friendly-to-Iran Shia majority rule, and Iranian ally Syria, which is in ruin, are under attack by a fanatically destructive fundamentalist and jihadist Sunni force, ISIL, driving to carve out a manic proto-state committed to war with its enemies, near and far. The interests of ISIL's main "near" enemy, Iran, now overlap with those of the designated top "far" enemy, the US. Willy-nilly, after believing it had finally exited its draining long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US is back in conflict with Muslims, but this time working tacitly with its principal Muslim antagonist, Iran.

This worries Israel. Successive Arab-Israeli wars had made militant antagonism to both Israel and the US a fact of regional life, aggravated by chronic terrorism. The Iranian regime is rabidly anti-Zionist, out of solidarity of an Islamist Revolution with fellow Muslims and as a means of burnishing Iran's non-Arab credentials in the region.

The populist firebrand president of Iran (2005-2013) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist and expressed support for Iran's right to have nuclear weapons, all assertions that are cited by Israelis as threatening Israel's very existence. That the current president of Iran and Ahma-

dinejad's successor, Hassan Rouhani, has called these extreme statements "hate rhetoric" counts for little with risk-averse Israelis.

Another visceral antagonist of Iran in the region is Saudi Arabia. This rivalry is often described in the West as a duel between the champions of Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi theology is no more tolerant than Iran's mullahs and every bit as committed to its heavily financed export to other countries. But Iranian-Canadian scholar Ramin Jahanbegloo sees it more as a geopolitical rivalry. There is no question that if Iran developed nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia would follow.

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The idea that Iran was on the track to develop nuclear weapons was a nightmarish aggravation to a regional situation that was always conflictual but which, in the past five years, has spiraled out of any control. Authoritarian kingly or sectarian regimes that had kept the region stable but backward were rocked by the nonviolent aspirations of the Arab Spring that became hijacked by competitive armed insurgencies and new openings for jihadist militants. The added threat of a nuclear arms race deepened the dangers from all angles of the regional lens.

Iran's sense of national exceptionalism has fuelled its presumption of entitlement to a national nuclear program since the Shah's day, partly as a hedge against over-reliance on carbon energy and partly as a component of national scientific development and status. The program is a source of widespread national pride.

Other states in the region were assumed to be developing their own capacities to weaponize respective nascent nuclear infrastructure programs —Israel is a non-acknowledged nuclear weapons state, and Syria, Iraq, and even Libya were believed to be trying; efforts that earned the Iraqi and Syrian facilities pre-emptive whacks from the Israeli Defence Force. The Iraqi boasts under Saddam were especially unsettling to Iran, given his volatility and record of aggression against Iran.

Iran's nuclear development program was therefore hedged. It complied with International Atomic Energy Agency conditions—Iran was a Non Proliferation Treaty signatory—but positioned the country to break-out to weaponization in steadily decreasing time frames as the ability to produce weapons-grade fuel proceeded from 2000 on. Testy relations with the IAEA inspections regime revealed a chronic lack of transparency. Though Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pronounced that a nuclear weapons program would be a sin, weaponization as an option was judged by many to be Iran's underlying aim. Its believability was reinforced by Ahmadinejad's threats and hyperbole, and by new underground facilities protected from all but the most massively destructive American weapons. Israel undertook a covert action program to degrade key Iranian nuclear capabilities, including cyber-war and targeted assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists.

More recently, the Netanyahu government weighed the option of airstrikes against the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, ideally together with the US. Pro-Israel US hawks chimed in support and criticized President Barack Obama for being "weak." However, the Obama administration's aversion to airstrikes was firm. A) An attack might retard the Iranian program but only briefly. B) It would definitely commit Iran to go for nuclear weapons. C) An attack would not receive wide international support. D) It would bury any chance for US-Iran conciliation and darken the already grim regional landscape in dangerous ways.

The US/EU alternative to a military strike on Iran was a dire program of sanctions on Iran to force the abandonment of the nuclear weapons option. Skeptics about economic sanctions have to acknowledge that for once they worked. Over the course of a decade, the sanctioning countries held together. Jahanbegloo writes that "Under the EU embargo and US sanctions, Iran's (oil) exports had fallen to 700,000 barrels per day by May 2013, in contrast to 2.2 million in 2011. The impact of sanctions was also devastating for the Iranian currency, which plummeted by at least 40 per cent, and the soaring price of food. The health of millions of Iranians was compromised because of the shortage of western medical supplies…Given the economic strain, Iran was absolutely desperate for a deal, though Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had repeated on several occasions that any agreement must preserve Iran's 'dignity and integrity,' giving it the freedom to pursue a civilian nuclear program." There is no question that Iran is undergoing internal change. Well-educated, urbanized youth especially chafe under petty religious strictures and Iran's international isolation. Rouhani is cautiously exploring the openings for more normal cooperation with the West. The Supreme Leader is clearly not there yet, though he seems to acknowledge the need for a lighter hand if the theocracy is to survive intact. Whether or not to support the deal with Iran depends to some extent on evidence that the regime's export of antagonism is abating.

Not everyone is thrilled with the outcome thus far. For Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu, it is a "bad deal" that "threatens the very survival" of Israel, a hyperbolic reaction that has already been moderated by Israeli proposals to strengthen the accord. The US will be extremely reluctant to re-litigate settled issues but some Israeli suggestions from the Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, Yuval Steinitz, might be worked in. They won't include Netanyahu's additional "non-negotiable" condition that Iran recognize Israel's right to exist, though hopefully Iran will come around unilaterally to formalize the acknowledgement of Israel's reality hinted at recently by President Rouhani.

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Saudi reaction corresponds to Israel's. The US is reassuring their joint fear that greater comity with Iran means the US will rely less on them in the Middle East. President Obama could not be more clear that the US has Israel's back, will defend Israel, understands its concerns, and will monitor implementation of the agreement like a hawk, reminding all "that we are powerful enough to be able to test these propositions without putting ourselves at risk."

Nonetheless, the writing on the wall shows a US whose core interests are less focused on oil and more on making the region work. By re-establishing diplomatic contact and even limited cooperation with a regional power that increasingly wants stability, that is hostile to ISIL, the deal can help the US face a fragmenting Middle Eastern order with greater certainty.

President Obama has long wanted to put an end to stale, frozen conflicts with the likes of Cuba and Iran, provided there is demonstrable willingness on both sides to moderate hostile behavior.

There is a lesson here for current Canadian practice of not talking with adversaries for reasons that are sometimes "moral," and sometimes related to domestic politics. As former ambassador to the UN Paul Heinbecker put it, by childishly closing our embassy in Tehran because we disapproved of the regime there, Canada is "deaf, dumb, and blind" in Iran. Obama summed up the obvious point of any negotiation. "Demanding that a country meet all your conditions before you meet with them, that's not a strategy. It's just naïve, wishful thinking."

As Roger Cohen put it in the *New York Times*, "Diplomacy deals with the real world. The toughest, most important, diplomacy is conducted with enemies."

This isn't "moral equivalency." Nor is it "appeasement." Negotiating an alternative to war to resolve a fundamental and dangerous international conflict is the noblest calling of statecraft. P

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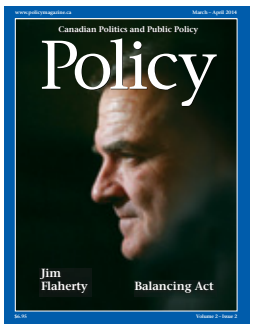

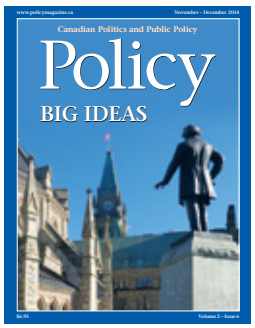

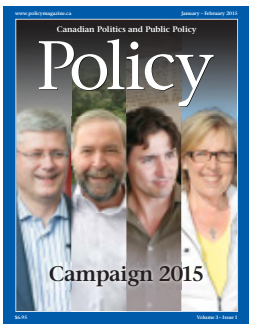

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