



Episode 475: Iran: The Myth of a Better Deal – Interview with Stephen Walt

Guest: Stephen M. Walt

WOODS: I read your article that I've just been telling people about, about "magical thinking," what you call the "myth of a better deal," with regard to the Iran deal. And before we talk about the Iran deal, tell me what you mean by "magical thinking," because it's a concept that can be applied to many scenarios, including the War in Iraq itself.

WALT: Well, I mean the, essentially, analysis or prescriptions or people offering policy advice that's based on essentially no clear statement of actually what's causing what. It usually involves unspecified causal relationships, no real supporting evidence, and in almost all cases, a certain naive optimism that everything will work as planned. So when someone indulges in magical thinking in foreign policy, it's saying here's a problem, and we can solve it by sort of waving our hands and adopting a course of action for which there's no real reason to believe it's going to work. We're just going to take it on faith. And that happens in lots of cases. Lots of different countries have fallen victim to it, but in particular I argued that the opponents of the deal with Iran have indulged in magical thinking by basically saying, "Gee, we could have gotten a better deal," without ever specifying exactly how that would be achieved.

WOODS: What are the primary complaints about the deal that we hear from critics? I get a lot of people in my Facebook feed, unfortunately – I must have at some point in my life indiscriminately added people, because I've got people who are absolutely up in arms about this deal for a variety of reasons. What are the most common ones you see in, let's say, policy circles?

WALT: I think the two or three most prevalent objections is first of all that this does not eliminate all of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. The original American position going back to early 21st century was that Iran had to eliminate its entire enrichment capacity, dismantle all of its nuclear centrifuges and basically make it physically impossible for them to either enrich uranium or acquire plutonium, and therefore make it physically impossible for them ever to have a nuclear weapon. The Iranians have said consistently for 15 years that that was not something they would ever accept, that they had a right to enrich uranium as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Other countries around the world have these capabilities as well, and therefore the idea of no enrichment capacity whatsoever was simply something they were never going to accept.

Now, in the period, sort of 2000 to 2013 or so, the United States was insisting Iran had to give up all its capacity, and in that period Iran went from having zero nuclear centrifuges to having 19,000. So the American goal was clearly not being achieved, and what we've done with this deal is knock back Iran's capacity from 19,000 to roughly 6,000 centrifuges, reduced their stockpile by 97%, and all of this means that if they were at some point in the future to decide they wanted to try and acquire a nuclear weapon, it would take them at least a year to do that, and we would of course be aware of what they were attempting to do throughout the entire period. That's I think the principal objection.

There are some other objections you occasionally hear, that this is rewarding Iran, that by lifting the sanctions they're going to get an infusion of money, money that's been kept essentially in escrow. It's Iranian money, but we've been holding it, and that that will allow them to do lots of bad things subsequently. Again, the question is would you rather have this supposedly dangerous Iran for a nuclear capability, or would you rather have it with nuclear capability blocked off? I think those are the two main objections. You also hear a few people talk about, you know, they're not entirely happy with the monitoring or inspections, but I think most experts actually believe this is a remarkably airtight agreement from the perspective of knowing what Iran is up to and being able to respond to it if need be.

WOODS: I do seem to recall hearing people saying that after the ink was dry on the agreement – we'd been told that American inspectors could go in any time they wanted to and now we're being told they can't, and this just goes to show Iran is not dealing with us in good faith. Now that's something that I just remember as a basic impression from something I read. I have no details on that. Do you know what that is all about?

WALT: Yeah, I think that's just completely not true. The inspections are going to be conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which has been doing nuclear inspections for decades now and is very good at it. The technology of monitoring a nuclear facility has also improved dramatically as we've gotten more and more capacity to do that. The level of monitoring on Iran's existing facilities is going to be more extensive than I think any other country in the world, so the likelihood that they would be able to cheat in any meaningful way, and we would not be able to detect it is remote.

And as a colleague of mine likes to point out, you can think of this as we have an agreement that Iran – imagine this is an agreement that forbid Iran from every building a car, right? Well, in order to build a car, you need to build a lot of different things, and if we found at some point that, gee, it looked like some Iranians were actually working on trying to figure out how to make a spark plug, the fact that they were able to make a spark plug didn't mean that they would then be able to make a car if they couldn't do all the other components as well.

One final point is that you have to go into this obviously not trusting Iran; that's why we have monitoring; that's why we have verification procedures. But you do have to

assume that it is in Iran's interest to abide by the agreement as well. There's no evidence, for example, that Iran is dead set on getting a nuclear weapon at all. They haven't been working on nuclear weapons for at least a decade, according to the American intelligence community.

There are good reasons, in fact, why Iran would probably prefer to be short of actually crossing the nuclear threshold, and the consequences for them to renege on this agreement would be really quite substantial, because one of the cleverest parts of the agreement is that the United Nations sanctions that have put the most pressure on Iran can be automatically reimposed if any of the signatories — and that means us — unilaterally decide that Iran has reneged on the agreement. We don't have to get another vote from the Security Council; there's no possibility of a Russian or a Chinese veto. This was a very clever arrangement to make sure that the concern that maybe sanctions wouldn't snap back if Iran cheated or it might take a long time to get them back in place isn't a concern. In fact, if we decide in two years that they're not meeting the terms of the agreement, we can essentially unilaterally reimpose the sanctions, and it would require a unanimous vote of the Security Council, which we could veto, to lift the sanctions subsequently. So in that sense, I think you have to go into it recognizing that Iran has a very real interest in living up to the agreement as well.

WOODS: I've heard a number of people point, though, to the type of rhetoric we hear coming from Iran, that they'll say we hear Iranians shouting, "Death to America! Death to Israel!" And these are people whose nuclear program we're going to be satisfied not closing down completely? We should listen to them and take them at their word when they pledge to destroy us. This is typical red meat, neoconservative talking point type of language. What would you say to that if you were confronted with that?

WALT: Well, I'd say two or three things. First of all, this is not a deal that resolves all of the differences we have between Iran and ourselves. It was never intended to do that. And similar to the arms control agreements that we had with the former Soviet Union, which was our vowed enemy, we decided we would be safer and more secure with those agreements than without, but it didn't end the rivalry between the two countries. That would be sort of point number one.

Second, if your image of Iran is that it's a relentlessly anti-American, hostile, aggressive state, you want to ask yourself the question, would you like that state to have an open path to a nuclear weapon, or would you like that state to be unable to get a nuclear weapon for at least a decade and possibly beyond? I would prefer that second world if I had a really horrific image of Iran as an aggressive state.

And the final thing I'll say is this is I think a caricature of Iran as a society. It's actually quite a diverse society; it has its extremist hot heads in it the same way we have some extremist hot heads here in the United States, but in fact, Iran has not been attacking other countries — something the United States has done on occasion in recent years. And though some of its activities we find very objectionable, I think it's misleading to characterize all of Iranian society and ever Iranian as sort of getting up in the morning

thinking bad thoughts about America and working 24/7 to try and think of horrible things they could do to the United States and to its allies.

WOODS: I think there is a third option, though. You give the option of Iran could either have a clear path to a nuclear weapon and there'd be no oversight, or we could have this deal. The third option would be war, and that's why I think the people you accuse in your article of believing in magical thinking because they think there could have been a better deal, I'm not sure that all of those people are really arguing in good faith. I think what they're really saying is if we couldn't get the perfect deal, then to heck with it; we should just go to war with them.

WALT: Right, and that has always been the sort of third possibility, that if, given that we said we don't want Iran to get a nuclear weapon and if we don't get some kind of diplomatic deal, then the question you ask is, if Iran appears to be moving in that direction, do you then have to take military action or do you do so preventively before they even have a nuclear weapons program, but to try and destroy the infrastructure that they might use at some point. The obvious objections to that are I think fairly straightforward.

First of all, I think it is the consensus of the national security community that the United States could not prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapons capability if it really wanted to. We could delay the program; we can do damage to it in various ways, but they have the knowledge. They have the technology to do it. You can't get rid of that expertise by dropping bombs on Iran. So you can only delay it and put it off a while.

The second point is the surest way to convince Iran's government that it really does need a nuclear weapon is to start dropping a lot of bombs on them. I mean, the reason countries get nuclear weapons is to provide a deterrent against external attack. That's why we have them; that's why the Soviet Union had them, why Russia has kept them; that's why China, India, and others have gotten them. That's why Israel has a nuclear arsenal of its own as well. Well, if decide to attack Iran, we are going to empower the hardliners in Iran who might have been arguing for a long time that they needed to actually cross the nuclear threshold.

And then finally we just have to recognize that war is an unpredictable business, and once you start one, you can't be necessarily sure of how it goes or how it ends. There's lots of instability already existing in that part of the world, and if the United States were to launch a war against Iran, we cannot be completely sure that they would not retaliate against us in various ways that wouldn't necessarily be an existential threat but which we would certainly find to be quite unpleasant.

So I think if you look at the full range of options, you know, do you do this nuclear deal, or do you either have an unconstrained Iran that can pursue a nuclear program without any limits, or the possibility of the United States launching yet another preventive war in the Middle East, I think it's pretty clear that the deal is far preferable.

WOODS: I've been seeing another objection, and I realize that your point is not that the deal is perfect; your point is that the deal is imperfect in the sense that it doesn't give the U.S. absolutely everything it wants. But in that sense, pretty much every agreement ever reached by any country is always going to be imperfect from that country's point of view, but that's what negotiation is. You give and take and so on. But one objection that I've heard is that Iran is the world's leading supporter of terror, and it's now going to get x billion dollars — I don't know if that's the release of frozen assets or whatever — and of course it's going to use that money to prosecute its terror around the world. How can we sit back and let this happen?

WALT: Well, your first point is exactly right. Any negotiation involves some compromise on both sides. No party in a negotiation ever gets everything it wants. When you go out to buy a car, you would like someone to give you a Mercedes and you'd like to pay a dollar for it, and the dealer would like you to pay a million dollars, but in fact you end up bargaining and you reach an agreement somewhere in the middle.

And that's true here. This gives the United States and its other partners in the negotiating group a lot of things we really wanted. In some respects I think it's a better deal than I expected for a variety of reasons. But it also does give Iran some things they wanted, and in particular, they made it clear, as I said earlier, that they wanted to retain essentially the capacity to control the full nuclear fuel site. They have all of the component ingredients there. So they were going to get some things out of it.

They were also not going to agree to this deal if it didn't lead to a lifting of sanctions and a release of some of the money that had been impounded for many years, and again, it's completely unrealistic to imagine that we could get Iran to do all the things we wanted and never have anything in it for them.

I would add one other point here, is we also want a deal that both sides have every reason to abide by, and if we had somehow managed to impose a completely one-sided deal on Iran, that would be the kind of deal many Iranians would be looking for ways to get out of. You know, maybe if politics in the world changed a little bit, they'd be trying to find a way to renege on it or weasel out of it. We want this to be a deal that gives us a lot of what entrepreneurs want but also gives Iran enough of what it wants that it's going to live up to the deal.

Now, on the second question, is this suddenly going to raise the danger that Iran's sponsorship of terrorism creates. First of all, terrorism has become this incredible bogeyman in American political discourse. We don't like some of the things that Iran has done and some of the groups they have supported, but I think the idea that they are the world's greatest sponsor of terrorism is just one of these clichés that gets thrown around. In fact, some of the things they have done are not significant threats to American interests.

More importantly, I don't believe this deal is suddenly going to ratchet up their sponsorship in various ways. The reason they're agreeing to this is in part because the Iranian economy is hurting and because President Rouhani ran on a platform of reintegrating Iran into the rest of the world, into the world economy and improving the lives of average Iranians. They're going to take the money that they get, both the released funds and what they'll get from increased trade with the world, and use that to help rebuild things in Iran itself. I don't think they're going to be using this to run around the world and cause more trouble.

I would just add one other point, and that is if you asked yourself who has done the most to destabilize the Middle East over the last 20 years, there's no question: it's been us, not Iran. The invasion of Iraq, for example, did more to destabilize the Middle East than anything Iran has tried to do in recent years, and we've got to bear that in mind when you hear lines like "greatest state sponsor of terrorism" and things like that.

WOODS: Do you have any thoughts on Chuck Schumer's opposition to the deal?

WALT: I think Schumer was responding to his own political calculations of what his donors were going to support and what his constituents wanted to support. I was disappointed, because I think his decision was unwise and his justification for it was not very persuasive, but I don't think anyone was particularly surprised by the position that he took. I don't think, in fact, it's going to have an enormous impact on other Democrats as well — maybe a handful of them. But I think everyone understood all along that he was going to oppose the deal and people took that into account many weeks if not months ago.

WOODS: Well, one final thing before I let you go. I'm sure you have studied this extensively, but I coauthored a book years ago with a guy named Murray Polner, who's been active in Jewish peace circles for a long time, and it really sticks in his craw when it's just taken for granted that when you say "Jewish" you mean Likud. He said that's not true. He says that a lot of American Jews don't support the U.S. military actions that are supposedly in defense of Israel and Israeli interests. A lot of them think these wars are a terrible idea, even from an Israeli point of view. So why is it automatic that Schumer's constituency is necessarily going to be anti the agreement, then maybe it's not, maybe he has a more diverse constituency than that.

WALT: Well, I think what we're seeing is the way in which interest group politics often work and not just on matters of foreign policy. What you have here is I think a situation where most of the opposition to this deal is coming from organizations that are embedded heavily within the American Jewish community, groups like AIPAC, groups like the Conference of Presidents, many think tanks, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, different groups that people like me and others have viewed as sort of the broad coalition called the so-called Israel lobby. The group is supported by J Street, a more peace-oriented branch of the Israel lobby, I guess, and groups like Americans for Peace Now.

And the key thing to understand here is that many of these mainstream organizations like AIPAC and others are in fact not representative of the American Jewish community, certainly not on this particular issue. They get a lot of attention; they have a lot of weight because they play a key role in shaping campaign contributions. There are wealthy donors like Sheldon Adelson and others who politicians like Schumer do pay attention to, but they are not in fact representing the median voter, either in the United States or in the American Jewish community.

And if you go back, for example, and look at the American decision to invade Iraq in 2003, these organizations were very supportive of the war. They didn't necessarily come up with the idea, but when the Bush administration decided to do it, they backed it and helped sell it. But if you look at public opinion polls, of where the American Jewish community was, the American Jewish community was in fact less supportive on average of going to war than the American population as a whole, which just confirms your point. These organizations, I think it's increasingly clear, are simply not a reflection of where American Jewish opinion is. As you would expect, there's a range of views within America itself, and there's a range of views within the American Jewish community as well. And I think that's becoming increasingly clear as this debate precedes, with groups on all sides of the issue weighing in and reminding us all that there's a lot of diversity of thought within that community and many others.

WOODS: This is Episode 475, so the show notes page will be TomWoods.com/475. I'll link to your books there on that page. I'll also link to your Twitter; I see you're on Twitter. I'll link to your faculty page. But if people are interested in following your work, is there any other outlet I should direct them to?

WALT: I do a weekly column for *Foreign Policy* magazine that they can find at ForeignPolicy.com.

WOODS: Okay, and I guess I'll just link to your archive there.

WALT: That'd be great.

WOODS: Okay, great. Well I appreciate your time. I think this answers the questions that I had, and I wanted to talk to you anyway, and I'm glad we had the opportunity. I appreciate it; thanks so much.

WALT: No, pleasure talking with you.