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YOUR INDEPENDENT, NONPROFIT SOURCE OF NEWS AND VIEWS FROM WINDHAM COUNTY, VERMONT



Randolph T. Holhut/The Commons

Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former nuclear negotiator for Iran and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University, spoke to the Windham World Affairs Council at Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro on May 11.

News

Is peace possible?

After Trump scraps nuclear deal with Iran, former Iranian negotiator tells Windham World Affairs Council about what might happen next in Mideast

Originally published in The Commons issue #459 (Wednesday, May 16, 2018). This story appeared on page A1.

By Randolph T. Holhut/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—With the May 8 announcement by President Donald J. Trump that the U.S. would withdraw its support for a 2015 nuclear nonproliferation agreement with Iran, the Middle East, and the world at large, are entering a dangerous new era.

That was the assessment of Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former nuclear negotiator for Iran and current nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University, who spoke to the Windham World Affairs Council on May 11 at Centre

Congregational Church.

The deal that was struck between Iran and six world powers — the U.S., the U.K., Russia, France, China, and Germany — is formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. It lifted crippling economic sanctions on Iran in return for limitations to the country's controversial nuclear program.

Mousavian, author of *Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*, said Iran has been subject to a thorough and intrusive oversight and inspection of its nuclear program, and that, according to the International Atomic Energy Commission, Iran has been in total compliance with the JCPOA.

While Trump has called JCPOA “a horrible, one-sided deal that should have never, never been made,” Mousavian said that JCPOA was “one of the most significant nuclear nonproliferation agreements” of the post-Cold War era.

However, he added that the U.S. withdrawal from the deal will have effects that go far beyond Iran.

Skepticism confirmed

The nuclear deal was significant, Mousavian said, because it marked the first time that a crisis in the Middle East was resolved peacefully through diplomacy. It was also one of the rare moments that the world's major powers worked together for a common goal.

Mousavian said Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal now reinforces all the misgivings that Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had at the start of negotiations during the Obama administration.

“He didn't interfere,” Mousavian said, “but he warned that the U.S. can't be trusted.”

That mistrust, he said, was created by decades of U.S. interference in Iran, starting in 1953, when the CIA engineered a coup to oust democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and install monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the country's ruler.

The 1978 Iranian Revolution, which ousted the monarchy, marked the starting point of four decades of open hostility between the U.S. and Iran. The efforts of the Obama administration to negotiate the JCPOA marked one of the few times that relations between the two nations thawed.

Keeping the peace

In Mousavian's view, the Middle East “is on the verge of collapse.”

Most of the instability, he said, can be traced back to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. role in removing Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, U.S. support in the Saudi-led war on Yemen, and the multi-sided conflict in Syria.

He said the JCPOA had raised hopes that Iran and the West could cooperate to resolve regional conflicts, something that he believes is key to future peace in the Middle East.

The Trump administration's decision to economically and politically isolate Iran “will make the region less safe,” said Mousavian, and is more likely to pull the U.S. deeper into the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq,

Syria, and Yemen.

“You are not going to get peace until the U.S. and Iran cooperate,” he said.

And, given Iran’s status as a major power in the Middle East, Mousavian said it will not accept being marginalized by the U.S.

What’s next?

In a piece published on the website of *Foreign Affairs* magazine after the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, Mousavian wrote that “Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran would remain committed to the terms of the JCPOA while it negotiates with the other parties to the deal.”

However, Mousavian wrote that “if a satisfactory solution cannot be found that safeguards the economic benefits Iran is entitled to under the deal, Rouhani said Iran would ‘start enriching uranium more than before.’”

Mousavian also wrote that “the U.S. strategy of pursuing unrelenting confrontation with Iran ... is based on a misreading of Iranian strategic thinking. Iran’s regional posture is not offensive but aimed at deterring a U.S. or Israeli attack and ensuring the stability of its neighbors, lest chaos spread across its borders. It has supported the central states in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to this end.”

In short, Mousavian believes that Trump “has rebuffed the potential for regional cooperation and raised the real possibility of a devastating conflict with Iran. Trump is also pushing Iran closer to Russia and China, even as his decision is increasing tensions between them and the United States. Whatever the motivation behind Trump’s decision to withdraw, sound geopolitical strategy is not one of them.”

In his remarks to the WWAC audience, Mousavian didn’t mention Israel. That was something that didn’t go unnoticed by several members of the audience who questioned Mousavian about Israel’s role in the Iran-U.S. dispute.

Israel has long been an opponent of Iran, and has long feared that Iran would obtain nuclear weapons. But, as Mousavian pointed out, Iran, which never has had a nuclear weapon, has signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, while Israel, the only Middle Eastern country with nuclear weapons, has not.

That is why, Mousavian said, Israel would have little interest in participating in what he thinks is the only thing that could bring peace to the Middle East — building a regional system of cooperation in the Middle East similar to the European Union.

“Israel doesn’t want to give up their nuclear weapons,” he said. “If they can be convinced, they would be welcome.”

What do you think? Leave us a comment

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**Lissa Weinmann**

Mousavian was a truly compelling speaker with a wealth of knowledge and deep insights to share. It was a privilege to hear him. Many thanks to the Windham World Affairs Council for once again bringing high caliber speakers to illuminate & interact with our community. The Council is one of a network of world affairs councils nationally, but it is the ONLY all-volunteer one. All talks are free -- sustained by membership fees. I have been a board member for the past few years. It is a great group, we share great food and conversation at our monthly meetings. We could use new members and fresh board members. Take a look at the website and join, and if you have ideas for speakers or topics you'd like to see covered, let us know: <http://www.windhamworldaffairsCouncil.org/>

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