

Where is the Obama Government heading vis-à-vis Iran?

Professor Zaki Shalom on the ramifications of the Geneva Agreement with Iran

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Even before the ink used in signing the recent deal with Iran has dried, it became clear that the real significance of the agreement will not be determined by its intricate and complicated wording, but rather by the way in which it will be implemented in practice. Like many other past cases on the international scene, it was only to be expected that contradicting interpretations by the various parties will pop up around this agreement, too.

Indeed, within the first few hours following the signature of the agreement, US Secretary of State John Kerry hastened to deny an alleged statement attributed to Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi, to the effect that "our enrichment program was recognized." In his prompt response, the US Secretary of State made it clear that the present agreement does not recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium: "The first step, let me be clear, does not say that Iran has a right to enrich uranium." It is safe to assume that in the coming months the gaps between the parties over the interpretation of the various clauses of the agreement will grow deeper.

The fact that in his 'explanation' of the agreement, President Obama took the trouble to stress that "Iran has... a record of violating its obligations" clearly indicates that the US Government is prepared for such reality. The question currently on the agenda are, therefore: will the P5+1 member states, and the USA in particular, succeed in channeling Iran to acting on the basis of the agreement achieved according to their understanding. will the present agreement serve as a convenient 'bridgehead' for the subsequent attainment of a comprehensive agreement that would lead to the realization of the proclaimed objectives of the USA – preventing Iran from becoming nuclear.

The answer to these questions must be based on a primary basic assumption according to

which Iran's nuclear project is perceived by the Iranian leadership as a supreme national interest of Iran. So far, the Iranian leadership has demonstrated an impressive willingness to pay a heavy toll on the way to the accomplishment of this goal. Over the last few years, Iran has suffered from an increasing political isolation on the international scene.

The sanctions, as far as can be observed, have had a serious effect on Iran's economy and on the life of its citizens. Overt and covert activities by Iran's enemies, mainly the USA and Israel, inflicted cumulative damage on Iran's capability to fulfill its objectives in the nuclear field. Nevertheless, Iran adhered to its program over the years and had some fairly impressive achievements, from an Iranian perspective. The P5+1 member states should, therefore, make the reasonable assumption that now, when the accomplishment of the ultimate goal seems so close at hand to Iran, it will be difficult to assume that the Iranian leadership would accept an outline that would mean the actual stoppage of Iran's nuclear program. Iran may consent to it against its will only if it became abundantly clear to it that the US Government is determined to prevent it from becoming nuclear, and that it is, indeed, prepared to use military measures to achieve that goal. President Obama's statements regarding the agreement being consolidated with Iran at the press conference he held on November 14, 2013 clearly indicated, in this writer's estimate, some erosion in the degree of determination that had characterized the Obama Government in the past regarding the prevention of Iran from becoming nuclear.

President Obama used terms that were mellowed and vague compared to his past statements regarding the objectives of the USA in this context. At the very beginning of his address, President Obama made one thing very clear: "We do not want Iran having nuclear weapons." It is hard to assume that this wording expresses an unintentional 'slip of the tongue' by the President. We assume that his statements are considered very carefully and that the President is fully aware of the interpretation that might be assigned to them.

Under these circumstances, it is hard to miss the gap between this wording and previous wordings in the same context. Here are a few of the President's past statements: A nuclear Iran is an "unacceptable" option (November 7, 2008). The USA is willing to "use all elements of American power" to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (February 27, 2009). The USA is "determined" to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (July 1, 2010). The USA is "committed" to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (May 22, 2011). The policy of the USA vis-à-vis Iran is not one of "containment" but one of "prevention" (March 5, 2012; March 14, 2012; September 25, 2012 – at the UN General Assembly).

President Obama went on to address, indirectly, the demand – made primarily by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, not to alleviate the sanctions imposed on Iran at this time. In a tone conveying impatience and displeasure at the criticism regarding his conduct vis-à-vis Iran, the President made it clear, implicitly, that he needed no moral preaching regarding the sanctions. He stressed, justifiably, that he was the one who harnessed the entire international community to imposing sanctions on Iran so as not to leave "a lot of loopholes" in the set of sanctions and so as to ensure that "they really had

bite". Now, after he had succeeded in consolidating the sanctions against Iran, said the President, everyone should recognize the fact that "I know a little bit about sanctions."

Using a less diplomatic language, the President made it clear that he did not need Netanyahu's explanations on the proper way to impose the regime of sanctions on Iran. The sanctions, mentioned President Obama, were not intended to 'get Iran down on its knees' and force it to stop its nuclear activity, as implied by the Prime Minister's statements. Their objective was to get Iran to the negotiating table, so that the crisis may be resolved peacefully. Indeed, stated the President, the sanctions had severely damaged the Iranian economy and led President Rouhani to the conclusion that Iran should engage in a dialog with the world powers as to 'what it can do to resolve the problem with us'; meaning, once again, that the USA does not expect that during the present round of talks Iran would demonstrate any sort of commitment to the relinquishment of its nuclear program, even 'at the end of the road'.

Referring directly to the military option vis-à-vis Iran, the President made it clear that he, perhaps unlike his critics, does not believe in the benefit of coercing Iran to stop its nuclear activity. My preference, said the President, is for Iran to decide that it no longer wishes to obtain nuclear weapons, and we would only supervise the process. In his subsequent statements, the President once again conveyed a high degree of skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the military option: "...No matter how good our military is," said the President, "military options are always messy, are always difficult, always have unintended consequences..."

The President further clarified that it was not at all certain that the military option would accomplish the required objective – stopping Iran's nuclear activity. It may even lead Iran to "go out and pursue even more vigorously nuclear weapons in the future..." In other words, the President is not at all confident that a military operation will deter Iran and lead it to stop its nuclear activity. It is hard to assume that President Obama is unaware of the fact that such statements convey a clear message to Israel and to the allies of the USA in the region, to the world powers and particularly to Iran, to the effect that the American Government will be very hesitant about using the military option against Iran.

At a televised address delivered on November 23, 2013, after the agreement had been signed, President Obama endeavored to demonstrate a higher level of determination to adhere to the objective of preventing Iran from becoming nuclear. This writer believes that the change of tone had stemmed, among other things, from the following primary factors: The critical responses of senior personalities in the US Congress and the open threats to act toward stiffening the sanctions against Iran. The harsh criticism voiced openly in Israel regarding the agreement, mainly by Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the more discrete criticism on the part of the allies of the USA in the region, mainly Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The apprehension of the US Government that France and possibly other countries as well will take advantage of the crisis in order to consolidate their foothold in countries that were hitherto identified exclusively with the USA. Among other things, President Obama stressed the following main points regarding the agreement with Iran: The agreement will halt the progress of the Iranian nuclear program,

and "key parts of the program will be rolled back." The United States agreed to provide Iran with "modest relief", while continuing to apply our "toughest sanctions."

The ability to supervise Iran's nuclear activity has been expanded and will enable more effective monitoring than before of the danger that Iran should decide to develop a nuclear weapon capability. Over the next six months, the administration will work cooperatively with the US Congress, among others, to negotiate a comprehensive solution. The principle underlying these negotiations would be: "nothing will be agreed to unless everything is agreed to." The allies of the USA in the region "...have good reason to be skeptical about Iran's intentions." Therefore, "As we go forward, the resolve of the United States will remain firm, as will our commitments..." (to our friends and allies).

In conclusion, President Obama stressed that his administration will do "what is necessary" to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. At the same time, he stressed several times, probably in response to Netanyahu's defiant statements, that he has "a profound responsibility to try to resolve our differences peacefully, rather than rush towards conflict."

The Implications to Israel

In effect, as far as the State of Israel is concerned, the deal that has been struck and the 'explanations' of President Obama clearly indicate that the President does not accept the courses of action suggested by Netanyahu for dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue; namely – leaving the sanctions in effect in their present form and demonstrating a credible and effective military option opposite the Iranian government, until they agree to make substantial concessions regarding their nuclear activity.

The wording of President Obama's statements clearly suggests that he has a profound reservation, possibly even objection, toward the military option against Iran, and even toward the threat of the employment thereof, at least at this point. Under these circumstances, it would not be right to regard the controversy between Israel and the USA as merely tactical, as US government officials have claimed. This writer believes that the controversy is much deeper and broader than a mere tactical disagreement. Although on the declarative level the Obama Government still adheres to its commitment to preventing Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon capability, one cannot help getting the impression that the US Government's resolve to actually take action toward this end has been significantly eroded.

The recent reluctance of the Obama Government to enter a military confrontation with Syria in connection with the employment of the chemical weapons, the image it established among various countries in the region as if it was "eager" to strike a deal with Iran and the vague wording of its statements have reinforced the impression, in Israel as well as among other countries in the region, that if and when the Obama Government faces the dilemma of whether to employ military power against Iran or to accept Iran as a nuclear state, it may prefer, much to the chagrin and regret of Israel and other countries in the region, the latter option.

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