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The Iranian Nuclear Crisis and the U.S. Administration: The Dilemma of Sanctions in Light of the Effort to Promote an Agreement

In his State of the Union address on January 20, 2015, President Barack Obama stated that Iran's progress toward achieving military nuclear capability had been halted and its stockpiles of materials with nuclear potential reduced as a result of the dialogue on the nuclear issue between the world powers (the P5+1) and Iran. By July 2015, the end of the second extension of the interim agreement which was signed November 2013, Iran and the world powers are supposed to conclude a comprehensive agreement whose principles will be finalized by March 2015. This period, according to the president, provides an opportunity to reach an agreement that will prevent Iran from completing its nuclear program, ensure the security of the United States and its allies, including Israel, and prevent a conflict in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the president stressed that since there is no guarantee that the talks will lead to an agreement, the United States is keeping all options on the table.

In his speech, Obama expressed strong opposition to the bipartisan Congressional initiative (which has been dropped, at least temporarily) to impose new sanctions on Iran. He warned that these sanctions would lead to a rift between the United States and its partners in the effort to stop the Iranian nuclear program, as they oppose expanding the sanctions. Moreover, the sanctions could hinder the dialogue with Iran, and perhaps even push Iran to resume its program. The president made it clear that he would veto any Congressional initiative to expand the sanctions. Thus, a two-thirds majority would be required in both the House of Representatives and the Senate to override the president's veto.

The president's resolve was further reflected in his statements according to which he will not repeat mistakes made by previous administrations; according to Obama, they were in a rush to undertake military action to address the challenges they were facing, thus entangling the United States in unnecessary military campaigns while neglecting the need to formulate a broad strategy to address international realities. The current administration's policy, he asserted, will be based on a combination of military power and diplomacy, preferring persistent, steady resolve over bluster.

Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated these sentiments. He stated that in the absence of an agreement, Iran would continue to advance its nuclear project and additional sanctions could collapse the entire sanctions' system. He also asserted that a senior figure in the Israeli intelligence community (referring to head of the Mossad) told a Senate delegation that imposing sanctions at the current time would be "like throwing a grenade into the process." Kerry echoed the president's position according to which the predictions that the interim agreement would facilitate progress in the Iranian nuclear program are groundless. Secretary of State emphasized the close monitoring of Iran's compliance, stressing that the agreement was intended to ensure compliance on behalf of Iran during the negotiations. Kerry added that prohibiting Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons (in the framework of the agreement) would only improve Israel's security situation.

U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power added that a final agreement with Iran would not be signed unless the P5+1 were convinced that Iran's nuclear activity was intended for peaceful purposes only. According to Power, if it becomes clear that an agreement is impossible, the administration will stop the talks and coordinate further means of pressure on Iran with Congress. However, Power shares Obama's belief that imposing new sanctions on Iran at this time would lead Iran to halt the negotiations and blame the impasse on the U.S. Instead of isolating Iran, the United States would ultimately isolate itself and could miss the opportunity to remove the Iranian threat by peaceful means.

It is unlikely that the U.S. government actually believes an agreement could be reached by spring 2015, in which there is a guarantee that Iran's nuclear activity focus solely on peaceful purposes, and that it will be possible to completely prevent Iran from advancing in its nuclear program. It is much more likely that administration officials believe they can promote a comprehensive agreement in a format similar to that of the interim agreement achieved in late 2013. Such an agreement would provide Iran with legitimacy to retain its ability to act in the framework of the existing nuclear parameters, probably with closer monitoring than in the past. In practice, Iran would retain an option to advance its nuclear capability at a time of its choosing. The administration may believe that such an agreement, even if it is less than optimal, and assuming that the existing sanctions regime would basically remain unchanged, would give the United States breathing room to continue the dialogue with Iran while there is no real fear that Iran would progress toward implementing its nuclear project in the foreseeable future.

For now, as long as the negotiations continue, the administration is adamant in its position that further sanctions would cause Iran to withdraw from the dialogue and, in practice, release it from its obligations enshrined in the interim agreement. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that the administration is relying on pressure from members of Congress to impose additional sanctions on Iran in order to attempt to

stimulate the Iranian leadership to become more flexible in its positions, so that an agreement can be promoted as the better option for coping with the crisis.

Naturally, the invitation extended to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress on the Iranian issue while the initiative to impose further sanctions on Iran is being formulated, has increased the administration's fears that Congress may be swept away, dramatically restricting its maneuvering room. For that reason, it has openly expressed dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's intention to present his position on negotiations with Iran and Israel's fears of an agreement that does not include a response to Israel's essential security interests. This was the backdrop to the administration's rather transparent linkage between Israel's positions on negotiations with Iran and sanctions, and U.S. willingness to assist in combating the Palestinian attempt to exert international legal and diplomatic pressure on Israel. A leak attributed to a source close to the Secretary of State made an overt statement as to this linkage.

Not only has Prime Minister Netanyahu's intention to address Congress increased existing tension between the administration and the government of Israel; there is also increasing tension between President Obama and Democratic members of Congress who intended to support legislation on expanding sanctions against Iran. The decision by these members of Congress to get in line with the president and, for the time being, freeze their support for the bill, led to the postponement of the vote on the issue, apparently at least until March 2015. Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi reflected an agreement with the administration's assessment that Netanyahu's planned address to Congress would hurt the administration's efforts to reach an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue. Although she has avoided saying so explicitly, her message to Netanyahu (and to those who invited him, particularly Speaker of the House John Boehner, a Republican), is fairly clear: he should not accept the invitation at this time.

The postponement of the vote should expand the administration's maneuvering room vis-à-vis Iran. It may take advantage of the postponement to convey the message that should Iran refuse to progress towards an agreement in which it relinquishes its aspirations to reach a nuclear threshold, members of Congress who support tougher positions toward Iran will work even harder to expand the sanctions. The postponement also diminishes, to some extent, the tension between Israel and the U.S. government resulting from Netanyahu's intention to address Congress. However, the government of Israel must now take into account—probably more than ever before—the quite direct linkage the administration has created between support for Israel in the international arena and Israel's not intervening by means of Congress in the administration's considerations concerning the negotiations with Iran.