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The Demand for Iranian Recognition of Israel

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Following the April 2, 2015 statement on parameters toward a comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear program formulated between the P5+1 and Iran, the Israeli government announced its demand that the final agreement include Iran's recognition of Israel. President Obama was quick to reject the condition, arguing that it amounts to Israel's demand that no agreement be signed unless Iran undertakes a comprehensive reform of its regime.

If President Obama thought there was a reasonable chance Iran would accept this condition, he presumably would have endorsed it and demanded that Iran recognize Israel as part of the nuclear deal. Acceptance by Iran would be quite a feather in the administration's cap, because it would help it allay Israel's concern about Iran's nuclearization; reduce Israeli criticism of the agreement by demonstrating that there has been a real change in Iran's stance – not only on the nuclear issue; and provide a partial response to domestic US criticism in Congress and the media of the administration's conduct in the nuclear talks and of the agreement in the making.

However, the President sees little chance of Iran accepting the condition and is worried that an attempt to place it on the nuclear agenda is liable to disrupt the talks and severely threaten the successful formulation of a final agreement. Thus, the administration again accepted Iran's position whereby the talks must focus only on the nuclear issue and the sanctions on Iran; expanding the talks to include other topics is liable to lead to their failure. Therefore the administration conceded its initial demand to include Iran's ballistic missiles in the talks because Iran insisted they had nothing to do with the nuclear issue but were an Iranian national security matter. For the same reason, during the talks the administration avoided bringing up Iran's aid to the Houthis in Yemen, saying that raising the issue would further complicate the already difficult nuclear agenda. Iran's human rights violations and deep involvement in terrorism both in the Middle East and around the globe were likewise excluded from the agenda. Iran refused to discuss any of these because it would have had to make concessions; it assessed correctly that the administration would back down so as not to create further tensions at the negotiating table and possibly disrupt the talks.

A US demand that Iran recognize Israel as part of the nuclear agreement would presumably be rejected outright by the Iranian regime, first and foremost by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei himself. The extreme anti-Israeli hatred and rhetoric against Israel were mandated by Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, long before he ruled Iran, and are basic components of the radical fundamentalist doctrine of the Islamic regime. In the eyes of the Iranian leadership, Israel has no right to exist as a political entity because Judaism is not a nationality, only a religion, a view reflected in statements made by both Khamenei and former President Ahmadinejad.

The regime contends that denying Israel's right to exist is justified by the trio of wrongs that underpin Israel's establishment and existence: the oppression of millions of Muslims under Israeli rule, the denial of the Palestinians' legitimate right to a state on all of Palestinian land, and Israeli control of land holy to Islam, especially in Jerusalem. Hence there is also an obligation on Muslims to liberate those lands through a holy war of reconquest rather than through an inherently unacceptable political settlement. To Khomeini, recognition of Israel is also unacceptable because the country – a foreign body in the heart of the Muslim world – was established by Western imperialism intent on dividing and weakening the Muslim world so as to be better able to exploit it. In his opinion, no compromise or concession in the struggle against Israel is possible because this is a struggle between the forces of justice and the forces of oppression and heresy. Therefore, the eradication of Israel and the liberation of Jerusalem are an integral part of the ultimate success of the Islamic movement, stemming from the founding principles of the revolution and, indeed, Islam itself. Recognition of Israel would thus be tantamount to destroying one of the pillars of the Iranian regime.

Yet even if the refusal to recognize Israel is a mainstay of the Iranian regime's worldview or at least that of its radical leadership, this does not necessarily mean that nothing can be done about it. While the current Iranian leadership would likely not agree to recognize Israel, it is possible that at some future point a quiet understanding between the US administration and the Iranian regime can be reached whereby Iran's leaders will stop calling for the destruction of Israel. Since his election, President Rouhani has avoided denying the Holocaust, seeing the pitfall created Ahmadinejad. However, recognition of Israel will not happen anytime soon and it is in any case unlikely that the administration will raise the issue as part of the nuclear talks. In the longer term, if the talks lead to a permanent agreement that paves the way for a more positive atmosphere between the US and Iran and perhaps also to a more extensive dialogue on other regional issues – as is Obama's hope – it may be that the US administration will rethink the demand to recognize Israel. In the even longer term, a change in Iran's attitude to Israel could occur if there is a change in the essential nature of the Iranian regime – a change that if at all possible, is far in the future.

Thus while before any final agreement on the nuclear program is signed the Obama administration will likely not demand that Iran recognize Israel, this does not mean that there was no point in Israel raising the issue. On the contrary, correct diplomacy can and must stress the connection between the radical fundamentalist regime in Iran, with its public calls for the destruction of the State of Israel, and Iran's possession of nuclear weapons, which would spell the most severe threat to the country's security. Even if Obama hurried to reject Israel's demand outright – apparently concerned that it might generate enough domestic pressure to endorse the demand – it can be understood by a significant portion of the Congress and the US media and public, and make it difficult for the administration to dismiss it outright. It is clear that the administration would view this as yet another Israeli attempt to impede the talks and make it difficult to formulate an agreement. Still, there is a chance that the Israeli demand will be viewed by many as both justified and rational.

