



INSS Insight No. 712, June 23, 2015

An American Military Option against Iran: A Vanishing Idea

Gideon Sa'ar and Zaki Shalom

An important statement by President Barack Obama in an interview with Ilana Dayan broadcast on the Israeli investigative television program *Uvda* (“Fact”) on June 2, 2015 has not had the public reverberation it deserves. In this interview, President Obama stated that “a military solution will not fix it [the Iranian nuclear problem],” and added that even if the United States were to take part in such a solution, “it would [only] temporarily slow down an Iranian nuclear program, but it will not eliminate it.” This statement was just one in a series of recent statements by the US President and other senior American officials that raise questions about the effectiveness and even relevance of a military option against Iran in the eyes of the US administration.

On April 2, 2015, in response to criticism of the framework agreement formulated between Iran and the P5+1, the President clarified that the United States possessed the ability to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities, but that such a measure would only serve to push back Iran’s nuclear activity a number of years. Following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech before the US Congress and his fundamental criticism of the understandings reached by the P5+1 with Iran, the President wondered (April 11, 2015) what alternative Netanyahu had in mind to prevent the continued development of Iran’s nuclear capability. The question conveyed the clear message that at this point in time, the Obama administration does not view military action against Iran as a viable option. On this occasion, the President did not limit himself to insinuation, and instead stated explicitly that Iran’s capacity to develop nuclear power cannot be prevented – “that’s not achievable through sanctions; it’s not achievable through military means.” This statement indicates the President’s doubts regarding the effectiveness of the two primary means of pressuring Iran – sanctions on the one hand, and the threat of military action on the other hand – to agree to a formula that could be regarded as a good agreement.

In a speech two weeks later, on April 30, 2015, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Vice President Joe Biden was highly critical of those who proposed cavalierly to take military action against Iran in order to eliminate the problem. To the question that Biden said is often posed, of “why don’t we just take them now and get it over with,” the

Vice President stated: “This is not only incredibly uninformed, but it’s dangerous. There’s nothing simple, minimal, or predictable about a war with Iran.” In his view, the United States’ bitter experience in the Middle East in recent years obligates the administration to display “a bit of humility” in assessing its capabilities, as well as a realistic recognition of the limits of its powers. Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who heads the US team negotiating with Iran, has gone further in her assessment of the limited effectiveness of America’s military option against Iran. She argued that Iran has the capacity to rebuild the facilities that will be hit, and that the military option will set Iran back only one or two years; the only relevant option, therefore, is to negotiate with Iran.

These statements give clear expression to the continuing and troubling erosion of the credibility of an American military option against Iran that has occurred in recent months and, more intensively, since the framework agreement with Iran was reached in Lausanne. These statements also run counter to the administration’s position in recent years, which repeatedly emphasized that in the event of the failure of diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement, all options, including the military option, were on the table. The recurrent qualifications regarding an effective military option raise serious questions regarding the US determination to honor its commitments in this context. They can be understood as indicating a process of US distancing from its view of military action vis-à-vis Iran as a realistic and effective option among the different options to prevent Iran from completing its military nuclear program.

At the same time, these statements appear to counter the assessments of senior officials in the US defense establishment. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter told CNN that the United States has “the capability to shut down, set back and destroy the Iranian nuclear program and I believe the Iranians know that and understand that.” General James Mattis, former commander of the US Army’s Central Command, has asserted that the United States has the ability to “bring Iran to its knees,” and senior Air Force officials have dropped explicit hints that the US is capable of destroying Iran’s nuclear sites. General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also indicated that the United States military has a valid military option capable of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capability.

The statements by the President and others in his administration regarding the limitations of the military option against Iran are presumably intended to justify the emerging nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, led by the United States. In a speech delivered after the Lausanne understandings were reached, President Obama noted that the number of active centrifuges in Iran has increased significantly since he came into office. The clear subtext here is that the extensive sanctions imposed on Iran and the threats of military action, including from Israel, have not deterred Iran from progressing in the nuclear realm. From this perspective, therefore, no option currently exists that can

potentially prevent Iran's continued advancement toward nuclear military capabilities – with the exception of diplomacy and negotiations, currently pursued by the United States. If so, then all parties involved ought to support the current US diplomatic initiative vis-à-vis Iran.

The Obama administration clearly ascribes immense importance to the negotiations with Iran as a means of reaching a final agreement regarding the nuclear issue. This position has led it to cast alternative options toward a solution to the nuclear crisis as ineffective and irrelevant, and as measures that would lead to a full scale, risk-laden war with Iran. In an extensive interview with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg in mid-May 2015, President Obama explicitly presented the agreement as a milestone in the legacy he wishes to leave behind and stressed his great personal interest in reaching an agreement. Yet to achieve this goal, the President has proven willing to deviate significantly from the conditions for an agreement that he himself presented at the Saban Forum in December 2013, the most important of which was leaving Iran with a nuclear capability for peaceful needs alone. On this occasion, he stated that in order to achieve this goal, Iran was in need of neither the underground nuclear facility in Fordow nor the heavy water production reactor in Arak. Iran likewise did not need advanced centrifuges. However, not only has the President retreated from his own conditions, but in order to promote an agreement with Iran he has even been willing to reach an unprecedented crisis in relations with the Congress and with traditional US allies in the Middle East, most significantly, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Gulf states.

Thus the Obama administration's intense desire to reach an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, in addition to the administration's perceived need to respond to the criticism leveled against it following the Lausanne understandings, has led it to sharpen the rhetoric invalidating the military option against Iran.

This position by the US administration requires the advancement of a clear alternative position based on a credible military option that is capable of setting the Iranian nuclear program back many years. This option could be based on a series of strikes in the event that Iran were to resume its nuclear program – which would not necessarily result in a ground invasion in particular, let alone an all-out war– as a necessary lever for reaching a good agreement. On the other hand, what in effect amounts to a removal of the military option from the agenda serves to weaken the position of the administration and the international community in the negotiation with Iran during this final, critical leg. It is also a bad omen regarding its outcome.