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**The Obama Administration  
in Defense of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran  
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On August 5, 2015, President Barack Obama delivered an address that included criticism of Israel's stance on the nuclear agreement with Iran. Although his specific remarks were particularly poignant, the overall message was not new. Indeed, regular statements by the President, Secretary of State Kerry, and other leading members of the administration since the agreement was signed in Vienna are intended to persuade Congress and US public opinion of the value of the nuclear agreement and why it merits United States approval. What follows is a review of the administration's leading contentions in favor of the agreement.

***The agreement as a means to block Iran's path to nuclear capability:*** The President has sounded strong praise for the agreement, calling it "a very good deal" that "permanently prohibits Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon." Secretary of State Kerry and Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz used a variety of terms in this context, averring that the agreement would "block," "shut off," "close off," "cut off," and "prevent" Iran's path to nuclear weapons. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter was more cautious, saying, "This new deal – when implemented – will place significant limitations on Iran that will effectively cut off its pathways to the fissile material for a nuclear bomb."

***Acceptance of a given situation:*** The administration is clearly making an effort to refute arguments that the agreement contains excessive concessions by the United States, particularly regarding recognition of Iran as a nuclear threshold state. Administration spokespersons reiterate that the agreement only improves an existing situation: "Folks," Kerry said, "They [the Iranians] already have what they want....They already have conquered the fuel cycle. When we began our negotiations, Iran had enough fissile material for 10 to 12 bombs. They had 19,000 centrifuges, up from the 163 that they had back in 2003 when the prior administration was engaged with them on this very topic."

***The situation requires a realistic resolution:*** Under the existing circumstances, the entire nuclear program could not be dismantled. From the outset, the aim was to neutralize the

military element of the nuclear program, and allow Iran to develop a nuclear program for “peaceful purposes only” (at the 2013 Saban Forum, in answer to a question from Amos Yadlin, President Obama said that advanced centrifuges and the nuclear development sites at Arak and Fordow were not needed in a program for peaceful purposes). To be sure, the agreement is not perfect, and it would certainly be better if the entire project were neutralized, but all the American intelligence agencies agree that this is not a realistic objective.

***Inspection:*** The agreement is not based on trust, but on broad, unprecedented inspection arrangements. Kerry emphasized that he had never spoken about inspection in terms of “anytime, anywhere.” Moniz clarified that his use of the words was explicitly “in the sense of a well-defined process with a well-defined end time.”

***The agreement does not connote US acceptance of an Iranian military nuclear capability:*** Administration spokespersons reiterate that President Obama will never accept a military nuclear capability for Iran. President Obama, Kerry said, is the one who led the development of a massive ordnance penetrator (MOP). Furthermore, the agreement does not preclude a possible conflict with Iran if it does not comply with the provisions of the agreement. However, the Obama administration is confident that the Iranian nuclear project can be neutralized through diplomatic means, and insist that the alternative to an agreement is war, which for the administration is a last resort.

***Limitations of the military option and sanctions:*** The administration stresses that the military option and sanctions are of limited use in preventing Iran from attaining nuclear capability. Iran now has the knowledge and experience to produce nuclear weapons, and that cannot be eliminated through airstrikes or sanctions. History proves that sanctions led Iran to the negotiating table but not to dismantlement of its nuclear program, and that a military offensive could at most put Iran two to three years back in its program – and then, “you know what the response will be,” Kerry warned.

***Sole focus on the nuclear issue:*** The administration is well aware of the nature of the Iranian regime, its massive support for terrorist organizations, its subversion regarding many regimes in the Middle East, and its hold of American hostages. The administration nevertheless decided to focus exclusively on the nuclear question; otherwise, “we’d never get where we needed to stop the nuclear program.” Clearly after the agreement is approved, the United States will have to discuss the aforementioned issues with Iran, but the ability of the United States to deal with these issues will be greater once Iran has no nuclear capability.

***The growing opposition in the United States to the agreement*** derives essentially from: a. lack of comprehensive information about the agreement; b. its complexity – “it’s a complicated piece of business”; the implication that so-called ordinary people can barely

understand its value; c. the highly negative image of Iran in the United States, which suggests that people would oppose almost any deal with Iran; d. the fact that some opponents of the agreement are apparently "not interested in the substance of the issue...[but] in the politics of the issue."

***The opponents are a marginalized minority:*** Besides the United States, all the major powers, which have vast experience in the nuclear sphere, have signed the agreement. The leading experts from the United States helped design it, and scientists from all over the world have expressed support for it. In his August 5 speech, President Obama stressed that "every nation in the world that has commented publicly, with the exception of the Israeli government, has expressed support" for the agreement. Secretary Kerry reminded the Republican representatives in Congress that on June 12, 2008, Republican President Bush had offered Iran a settlement that would have enabled it under certain conditions to retain nuclear capability for peaceful purposes.

***Containing Netanyahu's status as the leader of the opposition:*** The importance of Netanyahu's opposition to the agreement should be evaluated, bearing in mind three main points: a. He has spoken vociferously against Iran's nuclear project, but has not been able to eliminate it. Kerry: "We've seen the prime minister with a cartoon of a bomb at the UN and so on and so forth. But what's happened? What has anybody done about it?" b. Netanyahu vehemently opposed the interim agreement signed with Iran, terming it a "historic mistake," but ultimately demanded that the principles of this agreement be retained. c. It is doubtful whether a majority in Israel support Netanyahu's position, and former senior defense officials in Israel support the agreement.

***Understanding Israel's concerns:*** The United States acknowledges the legitimacy of Israel's concerns, given the hostile and dangerous environment surrounding it and the threats by Iranian leaders to destroy Israel. Nonetheless, the administration believes that the agreement will enhance Israel's security. The administration is determined to take far reaching measures to enhance Israel's security. This goal was among the reasons for the recent visit to Israel by Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

***A change in Iran's image:*** The administration stresses that it is not naive, and is well aware of Iran's record in violating agreements. At the same time, spokespersons suggest looking at Iran with different lenses, based on the experience of the past two years, which proves that Iran has fulfilled all the obligations it took upon itself. Kerry suggested thinking about Iran in the future as an NPT member state that seeks to strengthen its nuclear capability for peaceful purposes, emphasizes economic development, is interested in regional stability, and seeks to fulfill a positive role in the international arena; as President Obama put it, Iran as a "very successful regional power."

***The danger of rejecting the agreement:*** Rejecting the agreement will allow Iran to advance its program without interruption. The united front among the world powers will disintegrate, and the sanctions regime will collapse. Furthermore, United States credibility as a leading international power will be harmed, and the rejection may lead to military conflict that will harm both the United States and Israel, while Israel will be blamed for the rejection. The implied message is that this will result in a severe blow to Israel's status and image in American public opinion.

The intense debate underway in the United States about the agreement is a tribute to American democracy – similar debates are not taking place in any of the other countries that are parties to the agreement. The impression created by these discussions, particularly in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is that the administration is presenting sound and balanced arguments. At the same time, the opponents of the agreement have highlighted some of the agreement's problematic nature, especially the existence of secret arrangements between the International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran that were not fully disclosed to Congress. However, thus far the opponents of the agreement have not managed to refute the administration's main arguments. Moreover, many senators and members of the House of Representatives who believe that the agreement is a bad one are becoming convinced that its defeat in Congress might only aggravate the threat of the Iranian nuclear program.

