



Recalibrating America's Iran Strategy

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The United States-Iranian nuclear dialogue reflects a strategic shift in the US policy towards Iran, maintains **Zaki Shalom**

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As one examines the massive efforts exercised by the Obama administration to conclude an agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear project, one cannot escape the conclusion that a major change has occurred in the US attitude towards Iran in recent years. From a state that was considered and described frequently as a major enemy of the United States, and one that poses grave dangers to the US national interest, Iran seems to be treated by the Obama administration as a potential partner of the US with whom it has various identical interests.

It is this strategic change in the US attitude towards Iran that led the Obama administration to conduct an intensive dialogue with the Iranians led by their Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif. The Obama administration seems to have created a very friendly atmosphere around these meetings. One who does not recognise the personalities in these meetings would probably think these were being conducted between representatives of friendly states. The Obama administration certainly wished to signal to the world that the disagreements between the United States and Iran over the Iranian nuclear project should, by no means, disturb the rapprochement between the two states that both parties are determined to create.

Understanding the Change in US Policy

It is this shift in US policy towards Iran that led the Obama administration to maintain focus of the dialogue with the Iranians only on the nuclear project, despite awareness of the fact that the Iranian threat is perceived by the US allies in the region in a much broader sense: The massive Iranian involvement in various military confrontations in the region, foremost among them in Syria and Yemen; the Iranian support of terrorist organisations such as the Hezbollah and the Hamas, which pose a grave threat to the main strategic ally of the United States in the region – Israel; the great Iranian effort to build long range ballistic missiles; human rights violations against minorities and opposition groups inside Iran and the fact that Iran is holding American hostages. All these sensitive issues were deliberately cast out

of the dialogue with Iran so that the desired agreement would face a reduced number of obstacles.

Furthermore, throughout the dialogue, the Obama administration was ready to be engaged in an unprecedented constitutional confrontation with the Congress in order to ensure that there would be no disturbance by the legislative branch to the conclusion of an agreement with Iran. Eventually, a compromise was reached which authorised the Congress to examine the agreement. However, it is by no means certain that Congress will be able to block the agreement. And finally, Obama was not deterred by the criticism launched against him by several states in the Middle East, known as traditional allies of the United States, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Egypt, with regard to the “appeasement” policy of the United States towards Iran. All these highlight the eagerness of the Obama administration to conclude an agreement with Iran with regard to its nuclear project.

The change in the US policy towards Iran was clearly reflected in the gaps between President Obama’s statements regarding the purpose of the dialogue with Iran and the agreement concluded in Lausanne and proclaimed on April 2. Over a year ago, on November 23, 2013, President Obama stated, “Iran, like any nation, should be able to access peaceful nuclear energy ... The burden is on Iran to prove to the world that its nuclear program will be exclusively for peaceful purposes”.¹ A month later, he made it clearer when he stated, “In terms of specifics, we know that they don’t need to have an underground, fortified facility like Fordow in order to have a peaceful nuclear program. They certainly don’t need a heavy-water reactor at Arak in order to have a peaceful nuclear program. They don’t need some of the advanced centrifuges that they currently possess in order to have a limited, peaceful nuclear program.”² And finally, in an article in Haaretz he stated, “We have been clear that any agreement must provide concrete, verifiable assurances that Iran’s nuclear program is exclusively peaceful”.³

It is clear that there is a huge gap between the President’s unequivocal statements regarding the goals of the dialogue with Iran and the Lausanne statement. While the US goals stipulated for Iran are for a strictly peaceful nuclear program, the understanding concluded with them to ensure the on-going activity of their nuclear facilities. In fact, the agreement recognises Iran as a potential nuclear state. Even President Obama admitted that “in Year 2013, 2014 and 2015, the Iranians have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that point, the breakout times would have shrunk almost down to zero”.⁴

Nuances of the Nuclear Project

The policy of the Obama administration towards Iran is derived, in the first place, from its assessment that the Iranian nuclear project is of vital national interest for Iran and is widely supported by a variety of political sections within the country. Therefore, even if a major change occurs in the Iranian regime, an unlikely option in itself, the chances that this will lead to a dramatic change in Iran towards its nuclear project are very low. The Iranians have demonstrated resilience and determination to preserve the nuclear project under very harsh

political and economic circumstances. They have suffered years of political isolation and economic sanctions, but were never ready to give up the nuclear project.

Consequently, the Obama administration seems to have concluded that the only way to stop the Iranian drive towards a nuclear ability is by using the military option. No one doubts that the United States possesses an incredible military power. An American military strike on Iran would certainly cause devastating destruction to Iranian nuclear facilities. However, at this period of time, neither the American leaders nor its people want their country to be engaged in a military adventure that might drag the United States into an enduring war against Iran and other Islamic states, the consequences of which no one can really forecast.

Furthermore, the US policy towards Iran also stems from its awareness that Iran's nuclear project does not pose a concrete and imminent threat to the US homeland. It is a threat "only" to US allies in the region. The strategic doctrine proclaimed by the Obama administration clearly stresses that the United States should be extremely cautious not to be engaged in unnecessary military confrontations. As President Obama maintained in his famous West Point speech, "US military action cannot be the only – or even primary – component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail".⁵

A Stabilising Force

Finally, the Obama administration clearly estimates that in the coming years the Middle East will continue to be a highly unstable region. It will be characterised for a long period of time by internal wars and external confrontations. Radical Islamic groups will continue to play a major role in the politics of the region. Since the United States is totally reluctant to involve itself in this situation with military presence on the ground, the only state that has the ability to contribute to the stabilisation of the region by using, among others, military force, is Iran. Israel is also a powerful military state. However, it is a democratic state with heavy constitutional constraints. The ability of an Israeli government to use military power outside the framework of defending the state of Israel against a concrete and direct threat is extremely limited. The Obama administration seems to believe that once the nuclear issue is removed from the table, and Iran is recognised as a potential nuclear state, there is no reason for Iran not to cooperate with the United States in efforts to bring about stability in the region, as a reward for an American recognition of Iran as a potential nuclear state and its willingness to exert intensive efforts to stabilise the Iranian economy. Is this a realistic assessment? Only the future can tell.

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