

Israel, the United States, and the Nuclear Agreement with Iran: Insights and Implications

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Despite many predictions to the contrary, the Obama administration managed to prevent rejection of the nuclear agreement within Congress with relative ease and without having to cast a presidential veto.¹ Clearly the opponents of the agreement failed to create sufficient negative public opinion against the agreement. Beyond the fact that many high ranking officials believe the agreement is a good one per se, and that it serves United States national interests, the heightened support for it was helped, inter alia, by the following factors:

- a. The agreement's critics had no real answer to the administration's claims, especially those made by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, that at present no one has a better alternative. No one could deny the factually correct claim that even before the agreement, Iran managed to advance its nuclear project significantly without anyone stopping it.
- b. The President's threats that the lack of an agreement would worsen the situation and perhaps even lead to a military confrontation deterred many in the United States from rejecting the President's request. The trauma resulting from US military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq seems to have sparked fear of a deterioration that would require new military involvement in the Middle East.
- c. The fact that President Obama, who is concluding his term in office, placed himself squarely behind the agreement, which he called "the strongest

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non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated,” and an achievement of which “we should be proud,”² made it difficult for many to oppose him out of concern that their reservations would be seen as detrimental to the status of the presidency.

- d. Finally, the administration’s claims that even were the agreement to be rejected by Congress, the European nations, Russia, and China would continue as they saw fit – i.e., move toward the gradual lifting of the sanctions – also encouraged support for the agreement. The United States, warned senior administration officials, would find itself in such a case isolated on the international arena.

The agreement between the P5+1 and Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) creates a new reality for Iran’s position on the international arena and for its relations with the United States. The agreement will almost certainly have implications for Israel’s relations with the United States. With the requisite caution, this essay seeks to examine possible implications of the agreement on a variety of levels.

From Prevention to Containment

Over the years since his election and in different formulations, President Obama has stressed that he is determined to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear capabilities. At the same time, the President always emphasized that he would try to achieve this goal using first and foremost diplomatic and political means. Only if those measures failed would he consider using the military option. In order to back this stance, early on in his presidency he instructed the Pentagon to prepare for the use of force should this become necessary, and he strengthened the United States military presence in the Gulf, including with escort aircraft carriers. He also instructed the security establishment to demonstrate willingness to help Israel – “be very responsive” – when it came to acquisitions and intelligence.³ Even after the agreement was signed, he stressed again that if the Iranians did not stop the development of nuclear capabilities for military ends, then all options, including the military one, would still be “on the table.”⁴

However, in practice, President Obama’s conduct on the Iranian issue to date clearly indicated the tendency, from a relatively early stage of his presidency, toward containment rather than prevention. Former Senator Joseph Lieberman stresses the fact that for years the administration vehemently rejected Congress’ initiatives to impose sanctions on Iran: “Much like today, the White House repeatedly argued that sanctions

would isolate the United States and alienate our allies whose help we needed.”⁵ When referring to the agreement with Iran, Alan Dershowitz, who supported Obama’s presidential candidacy, says that the facts support the assumption that the President decided to realize the policy he had always embraced. Therefore, he was less than honest to those whom he told that the military option was on the table and that Iran would never be allowed to reach nuclear capabilities.⁶

In an essay on United States policy towards Iran, Dennis Ross notes that the Obama administration was deeply divided over its Iran policy. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen did not support the option of using military force against Iran, even if it turned out that the diplomatic efforts and sanctions were not stopping Iran’s nuclear ambitions: “They were not in favor of the use of force if all other means failed to stop the Iranian nuclear weapon pursuit,” Ross claims.⁷ Both, says Ross, stressed the “terrible cost” that would be involved in using force against Iran. The President, Ross continues, “kept his counsel to himself.” Before Vice President Biden’s visit to Israel in March 2010, the President asked Biden to try to convince the Israeli public of the administration’s determination to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons. The President proposed a somewhat vague formulation that said that Iran attaining nuclear capabilities would be “unacceptable” to the administration. Only after it was made clear that this was too lukewarm a phrasing did the President accept the more unequivocal wording of “the United States is determined to prevent.”⁸

It thus emerges that the two most senior personnel in charge of leading a military move against Iran – Secretary of Defense Gates, who served until July 1, 2011, and Chief of Staff Admiral Mullen, whose term ended on September 30, 2011 – opposed it. In fact, they supported the policy of containment. Leon Panetta, who replaced Gates as Secretary of Defense, also expressed his doubts about the effectiveness of a military option. At the Saban Forum in December 2011, he maintained that at best, the military option would achieve a one or perhaps two year deferment of Iran’s nuclear activity.⁹ Officially, of course, the president can decide on a military move despite their opinion. Nonetheless, one can assume with a high degree of certainty that no US president, especially not a president who explicitly recoils from the use of military force, such as President Obama, would dare initiate so complex and danger-ridden a military attack under such circumstances. In other words, at least until the end of 2011,

when President Obama declared that all options, including the military one, were on the table, in practice, the chances of taking a military option were exceedingly low.

It is almost certain that this was the background to President Obama's determination to accelerate efforts toward the political, diplomatic option. As early as December 2011, writes journalist David Ignatius, President Obama sent John Kerry, then still a senator, to Oman to propose it serve as the mediator that would lead to negotiations between the United States and Iran. At the end of those talks, Kerry – for the first time – proposed making a significant gesture toward Iran, namely, agreeing to allow Iran to “keep some of its enrichment capability” if a comprehensive agreement were to be formulated. This was presumably the background for senior administration personnel William Burns and Jacob Sullivan being in touch with Iran clandestinely during 2012. The breakthrough, writes Ignatius, came in the middle of 2013 when Rouhani was elected President of Iran. President Obama sent him a personal message and a proposal to engage in dialogue; Rouhani's favorable response started the secret talks between the nations. It is nearly certain that all of this occurred on the basis of an understanding that the agreement would allow Iran some enrichment capability. Ignatius does not specify what the scope of the enrichment would be, but presumably it involved a level that leaves Iran with the nuclear weapons option.¹⁰ If so, it does not tally with the President's declaration that the agreement with Iran was meant to allow it only peaceful nuclear activity.¹¹

At the same time, the President honed his message toward Iran with a direct, unequivocal formulation: in an interview on March 2, 2012 with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, the President stressed the following: a) a nuclear Iran represented a “profound” menace to the national security of the United States, regardless of Iran's explicit threats against Israel; b) therefore, it was a “profound” national interest of the United States to prevent Iranian nuclearization; c) a nuclear Middle East was a threat to the entire world; d) an Israeli strike against Iran would help Iran present itself as the victim and might deliver it from the isolation in which it found itself; e) one could understand Israel's fears of Iran, but they could not be the only foundation for action; f) the Israeli government was well aware that the President of the United States does not bluff.¹² At the AIPAC conference two days later, the President repeated the same points even more emphatically. He stressed that a nuclear Iran was a development opposed to the national interests of

both Israel and the United States. The United States would use all means available to it to prevent a nuclear Iran.¹³

Ross cites two basic motivations that may explain these remarks: the President's need to strengthen his status within the Jewish community in the United States on the eve of the presidential election; and the desire to prevent an Israel attack against Iran in that period. As former Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said, Iran was nearing the "zone of immunity" that would make it difficult for Israel to take action against it.¹⁴ The conclusion is that the President's threats to take military action against Iran did not necessarily express a genuine intention to realize this option at that point in time.

Ross stresses that this was also the impression Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came away with after a conversation with President Obama on November 8, 2013. Netanyahu made it clear to Ross that the message the President conveyed to him was that the internal situation and atmosphere in the United States did not allow an attack: "politics ruled out the use of force." Ross tried to convince the Prime Minister that this was not the President's approach, but Netanyahu was not moved: he felt that the message from Washington was that the political situation of the United States left the President no choice but to reach an agreement with Iran: "Our domestic reality left him little choice but to do a deal."¹⁵

In an interview with *Foreign Policy*, Chuck Hagel, who succeeded Panetta as Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration and served from February 26, 2013 until November 24, 2014, noted his "skepticism about resorting to military force." The interviewer thought that Hagel erred: "At one point," the interviewer notes, "Hagel misstated the President's policy on Iran, saying the aim was to 'contain' Tehran."¹⁶ Was Hagel, however, indeed mistaken?

In his speech shortly after reaching the agreement, the President stressed that he knew full well that the agreement did not quell the serious concerns the United States and the Middle East nations – especially Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states – have about Iran and its intentions.¹⁷ To confront the Iranian threat, the United States would offer its regional allies an impressive aid package, especially on the military level.¹⁸ The fact that immediately after signing the agreement, writes Ambassador Bolton, the President sent Secretary of Defense Ash Carter to the Middle East to conclude arms deals with the regional nations allied with the United States, especially Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Israel, is a strong indication

of the fact that, with regard to Iran, he adopted the policy of containment rather than prevention.¹⁹

Excluding the Military Option

The conclusion from this discussion is that President Obama's policy on Iran and its nuclear activities reflects a clear trend toward containment rather than prevention. Taking a broader look, one can say that this policy of the Obama administration reflects a far reaching worldview about the role of military power in United States foreign policy. In a speech at West Point on May 28, 2014, President Obama clarified his position on the use of force in what came to be called "the Obama doctrine." "Since World War II," said the President, "some of our mostly costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required." The result of such unrestrained action was entanglements in conflicts with high costs, including in lives, that in no way promoted the national interests of the United States.²⁰

The administration under his leadership, Obama said, would not embrace this policy. From his perspective, so his remarks lead one to infer, the United States would use military force only if and when there was an immediate and clear threat to the United States itself or to one of its most important national interests. It appears that the Obama administration did not see the Iranian nuclear threat as falling into this category. Iran threatens first and foremost the United States' allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, and to a certain extent Egypt as well. But Iran, at present and in the foreseeable future, does not endanger the United States itself. The clear conclusion is that to the administration, the fact that the United States has the ability to strike Iran harshly does not obligate it to use this ability. In President Obama's words, "Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail."²¹

In his speech at the AIPAC conference on March 2, 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu made it clear that he is well aware of the administration's worldview. He noted that there are some fundamental differences between Israel and the United States that inevitably lead to different assessments of the Iranian threat and, as a matter of course, to the United States' lack of willingness to take military action against Iran. "The United States of America," said Netanyahu, "is a large country, one of the largest. Israel is a

small country, one of the smallest. America lives in one of the world's safest neighborhoods. Israel lives in the world's most dangerous neighborhood. America is the strongest power in the world. Israel is strong, but it's much more vulnerable. American leaders worry about the security of their country. Israeli leaders worry about the survival of their country...I think that encapsulates the difference."²²

The apparent reluctance of President Obama to consider favorably the use of military force against Iran was especially prominent after achieving the agreement with Iran. Although the President made great efforts to enlist the support of Congress for the agreement, he did not agree to show a definitive commitment to use force against Iran should Iran make a clear and verifiable effort to achieve nuclear capabilities. According to Robert Satloff,

The most noteworthy aspect of these three letters [the President's responses to members of Congress] is what they do not include – namely, any specific commitments beyond the letter of the Iran deal text... In his various letters, the President addressed the issue but only in descriptive terms; he specifically did not adopt the definitive declaratory language legislators sought. To Nadler and Wyden, he used exactly the same formulation: "Should Iran seek to dash toward a nuclear weapon, all of the options available to the United States—including the military option—will remain available through the life of the deal and beyond."²³

Thus, infers Satloff, the President is clearly reflecting an unwillingness to commit to the use of force even when it is clear that Iran is racing toward nuclear capabilities. While the sentence about the military option "may be analytically accurate," Satloff adds, "it falls far short of making any commitment to act even in event of an Iranian 'dash' toward a bomb, begging the question 'if not then, when?'" Moreover, Satloff maintains, since the agreement was signed, Iran has violated UN resolutions in at least two ways: it has fired ballistic missiles and placed Iranian troops on Syrian soil. These acts failed to arouse any discussion in Washington about taking retaliatory steps against Iran.²⁴

The worldview that President Obama chose to adopt has led him to accept the assessment that in practice, there is no real option of stopping Iran's nuclear ambitions other than a political agreement. The sanctions, said the President, brought Iran to the negotiating table but did not and would

not bring it to stop its nuclear activities. In his opinion, an aerial attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would result in at most a two to three year deferral of the nuclear project, and there was no certainty that after a bombing the Iranian leadership would decide to retreat from its nuclear project. On the contrary, the chances were that Iran would decide to accelerate the project.²⁵

Entrenched in this almost axiomatic assessment, the administration took pains to characterize the dialogue with Iran as one being held in a friendly atmosphere. According to Secretary of State Kerry, "We were, both of us, able to approach these negotiations with mutual respect, even when there were times of a heated discussion, I think he [Zarif, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs] would agree with me at the end of every meeting we left with a smile and with a conviction that we were going to come back and continue the process."²⁶ Under these circumstances, one is not surprised by the fact that throughout the talks Iran was accorded the status of a legitimate partner making unequivocal demands of the United States in exchange for every concession it was willing to make in the context of its nuclear activities.²⁷

Conclusion

The nuclear agreement with Iran and its effective ratification by Congress represents an impressive political and diplomatic achievement by the Obama administration. *Washington Post* analyst David Ignatius describes the mere fact of an agreement and its approval in Congress as "an enormous victory" by the President, the "most determined strategic success" of the Obama presidency.²⁸ Even an analyst as critical of the agreement as Robert Satloff complimented the President on his handling of the Congress: "You were masterful," he said.²⁹

The agreement with Iran expresses profound, far reaching mindsets and worldviews on the United States' current status and manner of functioning. At core is the recognition that the US military will be asked to fight for extended periods of time only if there is a definitive and present threat to the United States or its most critical interests. The Obama administration does not seem to view Iranian nuclearization as such a threat.

Israel will have to take this reality into account. It means that even if there is evidence that Iran is violating the nuclear agreement and is, contrary to the agreement, taking action to attain nuclear capabilities, there is no certainty that the United States will be prepared to take military action against Iran in order to obstruct this trend. Under these circumstances, Israel

must internalize that the heavy burden of preventing Iranian nuclearization falls on its shoulders alone.

Finally, the conclusion of the deal also reflected the success of the administration in having the P5+1 ignore the deep disagreements among the sides (especially the divides between the United States and Russia on a range of international issues) for a considerable period of time and instead focus all their attention on the Iranian nuclear problem. The success of this model could lead the administration to conclude that it is possible to apply it also to other conflict areas, such as the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

Notes

- 1 Even as veteran and experienced a senator as John McCain estimated in mid-August 2015 that 60 senators would vote against the agreements and thereby reject the president's request for ratification. See Kristina Wong, "McCain: Senate will Reject Obama's Iran Deal," *The Hill*, August 11, 2015, <http://goo.gl/yLdRw0>.
- 2 The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal," August 5, 2015, <https://goo.gl/qsupiZ>.
- 3 Dennis Ross, "How Obama Got to 'Yes' on Iran: The Inside Story," *Politico Magazine*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/10/iran-deal-susan-rice-israel-213227>.
- 4 "Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal."
- 5 Joseph I. Lieberman, "Congress Should Step Up to Block the Terrible Iran Agreement," *Washington Post*, August 14, <https://goo.gl/sYWAvZ>.
- 6 Paul Miller, "Dershowitz: Obama Is an Abject Failure—By His Own Standards," *Observer*, August 5, 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/08/dershowitz-obama-is-an-abject-failure-by-his-own-standards/>.
- 7 Ross, "How Obama Got to 'Yes' on Iran."
- 8 Ross, "How Obama Got to 'Yes' on Iran."
- 9 "The indication is that at best it might postpone it maybe one, possibly two years." Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at the Saban Center with Q and A, CIE, December 2, 2011, <https://israeled.org/>.
- 10 David Ignatius, "How the Iran Deal Became the Most Strategic Success of Obama's Presidency," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2015, <https://goo.gl/cshZNz>.
- 11 "Full Transcript: Obama at Saban Forum," *Haaretz*, December 7, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.562259>.
- 12 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012, <http://goo.gl/m66nJ>.
- 13 The White House, "Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference," March 4, 2012, <https://goo.gl/0JCnyG>.
- 14 Ross, "How Obama Got to 'Yes' on Iran."

- 15 Ross, "How Obama Got to 'Yes' on Iran."
- 16 Dan De Luce, "Hagel: The White House Tried to 'Destroy' Me," *Foreign Policy*, December 20, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>.
- 17 The White House, "Statement by the President on Iran," July 14, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/14/statement-president-iran>.
- 18 "Ash Carter Visits Israel in Attempt to Ease Concerns over Iran Deal," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/20/ash-carter-israel-iran-deal>.
- 19 John R. Bolton, "Facing Reality on Iran: The Vienna Deal Sets up a Choice of Bad and Worse," *National Review*, August 24, 2015.
- 20 The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," May 28, 2014, <https://goo.gl/LkXOiz>.
- 21 "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony."
- 22 "Full Text of PM Netanyahu's Speech to AIPAC," *Jerusalem Post*, <http://goo.gl/ErntVf>.
- 23 Robert Satloff, "Unfinished Business from the Iran Nuclear Debate," *American Interest*, November 5, 2015, <http://goo.gl/XrqNP4>.
- 24 Satloff, "Unfinished Business from the Iran Nuclear Debate."
- 25 Gideon Sa'ar and Zaki Shalom, "An American Military Option against Iran: A Vanishing Idea," *INSS Insight* No. 712, June 23, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9929>.
- 26 US Department of State, July 14, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/07/244885.htm>.
- 27 "I also didn't think," said Alan Dershowitz, "Obama would be naive enough to take the military option off the table during the negotiations, and that's what he did and led the Iranians to believe that they wouldn't face the tiger and could negotiate with us as equals." See Jas Chana, "A Conversation with Alan Dershowitz," *Tablet Magazine*, August 24, 2015. Even those who support President Obama and the agreement with Iran, such as journalist Tom Friedman, could not avoid expressing surprise at the United States being unable to bring its many pressure levers to bear against Iran in order to achieve an arrangement that would prevent it from reaching nuclear abilities. See Tom Friedman, "Obama Makes His Case on Iran Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/opinion/thomas-friedman-obama-makes-his-case-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.
- 28 Ignatius, "How the Iran Deal Became the Most Strategic Success of Obama's Presidency."
- 29 Robert Satloff, "Letter to Obama on his Next Iran Legislative Challenge," *The Hill*, September 12, 2015, <http://goo.gl/A1Q2uw>.