Position Papers

The Iran Nuclear Deal:
A Monumental Mistake by the Obama Administration or a New Beginning?

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Abstract

The nuclear deal reached between Iran and the P5+1, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom, will be scrutinized by diplomats, military experts and politicians for months and years to come. Statesmen and politicians will interpret the deal differently and each will vie to use the argument which suites the audience and the domestic base she/he represents. However, the psychological, economic, political, and military implications of the deal on the United States, Europe and many Middle Eastern countries will be monumental. The deal will impact the balance of power in the Middle East, change the dynamics of the energy markets in Europe, and will cause a political rift and will ignite a fierce security debate between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Furthermore, the deal will bring the subject of regime change to the political forefront in the US and will raise a serious question on whether the use of force is the only mechanism to be used to change the behavior of states in order to achieve favorable outcomes.

Republicans and American National Security

Since World War II, the majority of Republicans and some Democrats have favored the use of force against opponents as a tool of regime change when faced with a challenge anywhere around the world. For instance, the Kennedy administration’s use of force to remove Fidel Castro in 1961, the Nixon administration’s use of force to remove Salvador Allende in Chile from power in 1973, the Reagan Administration’s use of force to remove a Marxist regime in Grenada in 1983, and the George W.H. Bush Administration use of force to remove Manuel Noriega, the president of Panama from power in 1989. Similarly, George W. Bush used force to remove the Taliban from power in 2001, and Sadam
Hussein in 2003. These examples reflect but a short history of the use of force to change regimes and compel other states to adhere to American dictates in the international system. President Obama came with a different assessment and understanding of global politics in 2009. His political and foreign policy philosophies were spelled out in his inaugural speech in Washington D.C. He promised a new beginning with enemies and friends alike. He wanted a new beginning with the world and began advocating for a new approach to the conduct of American foreign policy.

The Obama administration came to change the reckless habit of the use of force and replace it with new diplomatic norms. Obama’s new norms consists of engaging enemies, lengthening the shadow of the future, give cooperation a chance, unclenching your fist, and allowing diplomacy to take its course before resorting to the use of force. Obama’s approach to foreign policy reflects a new dynamic and a new logic and a fresh start to the conduct of American diplomacy around the world. This rational paves the way for observers to make sense of the President’s appeal at the beginning of his tenure to the Muslim World, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Al-Qaeda, and many more to change their attitudes and have a new beginning.

**Obama’s Approach to Foreign Policy**

The Iran deal, the opening to Cuba, and the historic visit to Myanmar in 2014, demonstrate the president’s commitment to shake the foundation of American foreign policy. Obama’s diplomatic moves struck a shift and redefined the American approach to regime change and to the practice of diplomacy around the world. It is clear that the president prefers diplomacy over any other method to bring a change to the behavior of other states. The president’s diplomatic approach with Cuba and Myanmar could be justified politically, for both countries are neither resourceful nor ambitious nor do they have the capacity to threaten any of their neighbors. In addition, the rapprochement to them could be understood as a balance of power move to deprive China from Myanmar and Russia from Cuba. Cuba’s proximity to the homeland vindicates Obama’s tactics and sends a clear signal to the Russians about the US’ priorities in its sphere of influence. Also, Myanmar’s closeness to China explains the urgency for the United States to open a diplomatic relations with it in order to have more allies when it pivots to Asia. But, Iran is a different case. Iran has political, economic, military, and cultural ambitions and seeks to expand in the Middle East and risk destabilizing the region for decades to come. Therefore, a deal with Iran that does not completely settle all the core issues: arms race, sectarian violence, nuclear proliferation, and balance of power is likely to cause more harm than good and threatens regional security for decades to come.
Obama Justification for the Iranian Deal

Many will argue that the Obama Administration rushed a nuclear deal with Iran, especially because Iran cannot be seen through the same security prisms as Cuba and Myanmar. Iran is a country with declared nefarious intentions that seeks to expand, and to dominate its neighbors. For instance, Iran has been meddling in the affairs of Iraq since 2003, has been spoiling any attempt for a peaceful resolution in Syrian, has been dragging Lebanon to the abyss, and has been agitating the situation in Yemen. Iran does not hide its intentions and desire to controlling capitals and geographic terrains in the Middle East and beyond. Iran, aspires to expand ideologically in the region by spreading its version of Shi’a Islam through its Shi’a proxies. It has been employing and deploying a great deal of its human and financial resources in order to accomplish this task. It has been building cultural centers, mosques, seminary schools, and sending huge caches of weapons to arm its supporters and facilitate its infiltration into the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Therefore, this paper stresses that the Obama administration should have been more careful with this deal and should not have deconstructed it to a nuclear agreement only. The Obama administration should have insisted on negotiating a comprehensive deal with the Iranian, and not only a nuclear deal. After the agreement was signed President Obama, gave an interview to the New York Times’ Thomas Friedman and said the following “Don’t judge me on whether this deal transforms Iran, ends Iran’s aggressive behavior towards some of its Arab neighbors, or leads to détente between Shiites and Sunnis.” Judge me on one thing: “Does this deal prevent Iran from breaking out with a nuclear weapon for the next 10 years and is that a better outcome for America, Israel, and our Arab allies than any other alternative on the table?” The President’s logic harms his allies and arms his opponents giving them all the necessary ammunition to attack him and argue that this was a monumental mistake rather than a new beginning. Iran’s nuclear project could have been stopped by many other peaceful mechanisms. For instance, sanctions, cyber-attacks, diplomatic isolation, economic hardships, working with reforms from within Iran, working with IAEA and the UN, and using soft power effectively. All the aforementioned tools could have stopped Iran from developing a nuclear device and would have pressured Iran to seek a new beginning with the international community.

To have a new beginning with Iran, the administration should have opted for more than a cosmetic change and delved into the core destabilizer of the region: the Iranian aggressive behavior, in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and should have insisted that any deal must put an end to meddling, expanding, arming, and financing groups who
seek disorder in the Middle East. Rushing a deal was unnecessary at this stage since the Obama Administration is likely to see no results of it. The implementation of the deal may begin in 2016 and lifting the international sanctions and the American imposed sanctions could take a year or two to materialize. Hence, a deal could have been delayed to achieve better results in order to safeguard and ensure regional stability and security. The acclaimed deal will complicate many political, economic, and military aspects in the Middle East and Europe.

The deal will hardly be a game changer for the US, due to the high level of mistrust between American decision makers and Iran. In addition, 2016 is an election year, thus law makers from both parties will not rush to debate the deal or lift any American imposed sanctions on Iran. In fact, Democrats and Republicans will distance themselves from the deal and will demand more evidence on Iran’s compliance with the deal before voting to lift or to ease any economic restrictions. Furthermore, the new president in 2017, Democrat or Republican will find her/him-self a hostage to an agreement that he/she played no role in negotiating. This could complicate the relationship between Europe and the United States, and could hinder or derail relations between US, Russia and China. The new president could ask for more verifications, or could scum to more domestic pressure to renegotiate certain aspects of the deal especially when the public becomes aware of certain articles in the agreement that do not allow robust and intrusive inspections to all the nuclear facilities. These ambiguities represent a serious challenge to any new administration. Therefore, the deal was not negotiated diligently enough and has many gaffes and fallacies especially those pertaining to its implementations.

**Problems with the Deal**

The deal has some loopholes that may endanger the balance of power in the Middle East and beyond. For instance, the deal states that “if Iran violates the agreement then international sanctions will be restored in 65 days.” The 65 days sanction will work as follows: if a state suspects that Iran has violated the agreement, it will be able to file its complaint with an arbitration board comprising of members of six world powers, the European union and Iran itself.” The committee will have 30 days to vote on whether to bring the compliant to the United Nations Security Council (SC). In that case the SC will have 30 days on whether to restore sanctions, and has the option of extending the deliberation by five days. In addition, before any sanction to be restored, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has to testify on whether Iran is complying and fulfilling all its commitments on the deal.
The mechanisms in place remind us with the League of Nations’ and its failure to stop wars and aggression in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. Article 15th of the Leagues’ covenant required verifications, voting, and arbitration before an aggression or a violation could be countered, stopped, or declared illegal. Japan invaded Manchuria and Italy invaded Abyssinia under the watchful eyes of the League. In the case of Manchuria, it took the League more than a year to send a commission to investigate the incident and report back in order to declare that Japan had to withdraw. The League’s precedent teaches us an important lesson about verifications and the nature of balance of power between and among competing nations belonging to any institution in an anarchic international system. The imbalance between the parties and their disregard to international law led to the demise of the League and World War II.

Similarly and in the case of Iran, the six powers should have agreed on what constitutes a violation rather than leaving it for an interpretation. The Russian and the Chinese may not agree with the Europeans and the Americans on the definition of a violation or on what would be considered as cheating in this case. In addition, when a violations comes before the UNSC, any country can use its veto power to freeze the process. Any debate among the six powers will happen while Iran is selling oil on the market and rebuilding its infrastructure. Therefore, the deal is not as strong or as durable as the Obama administration would like the international community to believe and may lead to more instability and chaos in the Middle East and Europe and it will hardly usher in a new beginning in the region.

**Conclusion**

The P5+1 framework is not going to end Iran’s nuclear project, It will only delay it by a few years. The deal will lift economic sanctions off Iran and allow Iran access to global markets and restore all Iranian frozen assets. This logic allows Iran to free itself from economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, the threat of any military strike, while maintain all the necessary ingredients for pursuing its nuclear agenda with better resources and stronger infrastructure. The Iranians will keep their know how technology, more than 5000 centrifuges, all the facilities intact, and the ability after 10 or 15 years to resume all of their operations with very little obstacles. For this reason, this deal may end up to be a monumental mistake rather than a new beginning.