

## The Tectonic Shift in Obama's Iran Policy

A nuclear deal is only the beginning. The president's goal, at the expense of America's allies, is full-fledged détente with Iran

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When President Obama took to the podium in the White House rose garden on April 2, his mood was victorious. With evident pride, he announced that negotiators in Lausanne had reached a “historic understanding with Iran, which . . . will prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”

In truth, the negotiators had reached no understanding, historic or otherwise. Obama was celebrating something that did not exist—at least not yet. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif had failed to agree on a text describing the terms of the so-called “Lausanne framework.” In its place, each issued a separate “fact sheet.” On some key issues the documents contradicted each other; on others they were entirely mute. Statements from officials did little to clarify the discrepancies or rectify the omissions. One official statement even seemed to widen the areas of disagreement.

In his own speech dedicated to the Lausanne framework, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, flatly denied that an understanding had been reached. He also disputed specific provisions of the emerging deal as described by the Americans. For example, he dismissed Obama's assertion that the framework would permit “intrusive” inspections. On the contrary, military sites were off-limits to inspectors, because, he explained, “one must absolutely not allow infiltration of the security and defense realm of the state on the pretext of inspections.”

If the gap between the two sides was this big, what possessed Obama to announce a historic breakthrough? The answer is that the president was eager to produce tangible proof of progress in order to prevent the Republicans in Congress from branding the negotiations a failure. He could fend off the Republican challenge, he calculated, by telling a tale of progress—by depicting the remaining disagreements as details to be ironed out rather than as insurmountable roadblocks.

Exaggerating the successes of Lausanne may have been a savvy maneuver against the president's domestic critics, but it weakened his hand against the Iranians by telegraphing his deep personal investment in the negotiations. Failure to get a deal would now be a major embarrassment. Knowledge of this fact gave Khamenei an opening, which he exploited with his defiant speech. Not so fast, the speech signaled to Obama. In order to get the agreement that you're already celebrating, you must pay—in the form of more concessions to me.

If past behavior is anything to go by, Obama will give Khamenei what he wants. Indeed, American concessions have propelled the negotiations forward at every stage. A good example of the established pattern is the fate of Fordow, the bunker under the mountain near Qom. At the beginning of the negotiations, Obama publicly stated that the existence of the facility was inconsistent with a peaceful nuclear program. But after Khamenei announced his refusal to dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Obama agreed that Fordow would not close. In the latest round of negotiations, his position softened further. The bunker would not only remain open; it would also contain operational centrifuges.

Thanks to retreats like this one, it is Khamenei's red lines, not Obama's, that have determined the shape of the emerging deal—a fact that prompts the president's critics to accuse him of fecklessness and/or naïveté. But these descriptions miss the mark. The president is not wedded to any set of specific demands. For him, the specific terms of the nuclear agreement are far less important than its mere existence. One of Obama's greatest diplomatic successes is to have persuaded much of the world, including many of his critics, that the primary goal of his Iran diplomacy is to negotiate a nuclear arms-control agreement. In fact, the primary goal is détente with Iran.

In the president's thinking, détente will restrain Iranian behavior more effectively than any formal agreement. In addition, it will also open the way to greater cooperation with Iran on regional security. Détente will permit the United States to pull back from the Middle East and focus more on its domestic priorities. Finally, it will vindicate Obama's ethos of "engagement," which he sees as a superior alternative to the military-driven concepts of American leadership championed by his Republican opponents. In short, détente will secure Obama's legacy.

By contrast, Khamenei is pursuing highly specific goals. Three stand out above all others. He is seeking, first, to preserve Iran's entire nuclear infrastructure; second, to repeal the sanctions on the Iranian economy; and third, to abolish the international legal regime that brands Iran a rogue state. In all three areas, Obama has already satisfied his core demands.

True, significant disagreements still remain. One of the thorniest is the timing of sanctions relief, another dispute that Khamenei emphasized in his defiant speech. Whereas Obama says that sanctions should be lifted in a staged manner, Khamenei is calling for abolishing them immediately. Sanctions, he demanded, "must all be completely removed on the day of the agreement."

How will Obama bridge the gap? He has two tools at his disposal. First, he will offer Khamenei what amounts to a signing bonus. Every piece of sanctions legislation passed by Congress gives the president the discretion to waive it if he perceives a national imperative for doing so. Using this waiver authority, Obama will unlock Iranian escrow accounts in China, India, Turkey, and elsewhere—accounts that hold somewhere between \$100 and \$120 billion. Some significant fraction of that amount, \$50 billion according to one credible report, will be handed to the Iranians the moment they sign on the dotted line.

Next, the president will seek, and certainly receive, the UN Security Council's approval of the agreement. Its stamp of approval will free the Europeans, the Russians, and the Chinese, among others, to expand their commercial ties with Iran. And trade is not all that will grow. The deal will also generate increased Iranian-Russian military cooperation. Vladimir Putin's recent announcement of his intention to deliver S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran offered a foretaste of that cooperation.

The president's offer of a signing bonus will be difficult for Khamenei to resist, because it will not limit his options in any way. On the contrary, it will increase them. Even if he has no true intention of honoring the terms of the agreement, it still makes sense for him to ratify it, if only to pocket the bonus and collect the other benefits that will thereupon accrue immediately. Later on, when Iran begins violating the agreement, the United States will likely try to re-impose sanctions. But it will now find the job of convincing the Security Council harder than ever before, for the simple reason that a powerful European commercial lobby will have come into being with a vested interest in doing business with Iran. Nor will there be any guaranteeing the support of the Russians and the Chinese for a resumption of sanctions. No matter what, Iran will negotiate from a position of much greater strength than currently.

Alarmed by this threat, the U.S. Congress is working on a bill that will give it the right to vote its approval or disapproval of the deal with Iran. However, a vote of disapproval can stop

Obama only if it passes the House and Senate with a veto-proof majority—a very high bar to clear. So long as the president can convince just one-third of either the Senate or the House to support his diplomacy, he will be free to pursue his plan. Although there's no guarantee the president will win the fight with Congress, the odds are strongly in his favor.

Détente may sound like a minor shift in American policy, but in truth it is nothing less than tectonic.

Obama has put an end to containment of Iran as a guiding principle of American Middle East policy. To be sure, he continues to pay lip service to the idea of countering Iran's influence, but his actions do not match his rhetoric. In Syria and Iraq, especially, Obama has long been respectful of Iranian interests while treating Tehran as a silent partner against Islamic State (IS).

Détente requires Obama to demote all of those allies who perceive a rising Iran as their primary security threat. The process, which has been under way for many months already, is most advanced in the case of Israel. Of course, Obama has never admitted that he is demoting Israel. He and his senior officials prefer, instead, to blame the deterioration in relations on the personal failings of the Israeli prime minister. They have spared no effort to inform us of Benjamin Netanyahu's myriad faults. His attitude toward Arab citizens of Israel, we are told, is bigoted; his failure to reinvigorate the peace process is indefensible; his readiness to serve as a pawn of the GOP is abject; and his supposed readiness to conduct espionage against the United States is treacherous.

The attacks on Netanyahu have been extraordinarily personal. Since the Israeli prime minister is the most persuasive opponent of the Iran deal, Obama is working to discredit him much as a defense attorney works to tarnish the character of the prosecution's star witness. He is also teaching a lesson to other allies who might be tempted to speak out. And potential critics of the Iran deal are not in short supply. In private, the French, the Saudis, and most other Arabs all bemoan Obama's policy. None of them, however, has stood up and directly attacked it in the manner of Netanyahu.

To reinforce the lesson, the president has given the Gulf Arabs a small taste of the chastisement he is holding in reserve for them. For example, in a recent interview with Thomas Friedman, Obama discussed the Gulf allies' fears of Iran. These fears, he implied, were misplaced. In fact, Iran was not the biggest threat to their security; of greater concern is internal unrest. Young people, he explained, have no legitimate means to express their grievances, and so the top priority must be domestic political reform. In his interview, the president expressed keen interest in discussing with the Gulf states "how we can we strengthen the body politic in these countries, so that Sunni youth feel that they've got something other than [Islamic State] to choose from."

Obama stopped short of accusing America's allies of fueling the sectarianism and violence sweeping the Middle East, but the veiled threat was obvious. A week later, moreover, he made it more explicit when, in a discussion of Libya, he said the Gulf states sometimes "fan the flames of military conflict." Whether to Israel or to the Gulf countries, Obama's general message is the same: Iran is not the problem; you are. Get your own house in order.

While criticizing allies for their parochialism, Obama and his senior officials have a habit of praising Iran for its supposedly ecumenical spirit. "I think what the Iranians have done," the president said in an interview last August, "is to finally realize that a maximalist position by the Shias inside of Iraq is, over the long term, going to fail. And that's, by the way, a broader lesson for every country: you want 100 percent, and the notion that the winner really does take all, all the spoils. Sooner or later that government's going to break down." To hear the White House tell it, Iran could even serve as a role model for the Gulf Arabs.

Behind such statements is a new vision of the American role in the Middle East. In Obama's eyes, the United States no longer leads a coalition dedicated to bringing order to the region. Instead, it is the convener of a grand negotiation between Shiite Iran and the Sunni powers. For over a year now, when describing the goal of his diplomacy the president has repeatedly returned to the same word: "equilibrium." If the United States does its job correctly, he told Friedman, "what's possible is you start seeing an equilibrium in the region, and Sunni and Shia, Saudi and Iran start saying, 'Maybe we should lower tensions and focus on the extremists like [IS] that would burn down this entire region if they could.'"

The president believes that his détente policy—especially his willingness to compromise on the nuclear program—will convince the leaders in Tehran that the United States no longer sees their regime as an adversary. They will then work more cooperatively with Washington, especially in places like Iraq and Syria, where we supposedly share a common interest in stability and in defeating the Islamic State. At first this shift may alarm America's traditional allies, but thanks to American mediation they will eventually drop their paranoid fears of Iran, and equilibrium will ensue.

The Saudi answer to Obama's pursuit of equilibrium came recently when Riyadh organized a coalition of Sunni allies and intervened in Yemen. The intervention is certainly an effort, as advertised, to counter the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. But it was also meant to send a message to Obama: if you won't organize the region to contain Iran, we will. To drive home the point, the Saudis gave Washington only an hour's notice before commencing the operation.

Riyadh's project of organizing the Sunnis, however, is fraught with difficulty. The three most influential powers—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey—all agree, generally speaking, that an Iranian-dominated Middle East is undesirable. But beyond that, they have no unified vision. The three cannot even agree on a common Syria policy, let alone a strategy for the entire region. The stark fact is that there is no such thing as a Sunni bloc.

There is, however, an Iranian bloc: the self-styled "resistance alliance" that includes Syria, Hizballah, and a network of Shiite militias now operating in Iraq, Syria, and, increasingly, Yemen. The glue holding this system together is the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force. By means of subversion and extortion, and by playing on sectarian divisions, the Quds Force is expanding Iranian influence throughout the region. No Sunni state has a military branch analogous to the Quds Force.

In short, Obama's pursuit of equilibrium is strengthening the player, Iran, with the greatest tools for projecting power and influence and with the least respect for the sovereignty of its neighbors.

Other than Iran, the only power in the region truly capable of projecting military power effectively is Israel. But its small size limits its ability to carry out a strategy regional in scope. Moreover, the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict hinder cooperation with the Sunni powers. While the interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel now dovetail to a remarkable degree, a historical chasm continues to separate Riyadh and Jerusalem. The two sides can coordinate quietly, but the impediments to overt cooperation will likely prove insurmountable.

The disarray and atomization among the anti-Iranian states in the Middle East means that they (like the American Congress) will likely prove incapable of mounting a decisive opposition to Obama's détente. But their inability to stop it does not mean they will ever accept it. They will remain dedicated to contesting Obama's policy, and they will continue to fight back against Iran and its proxies in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq—not to mention new venues that will appear over time.

Détente, therefore, will deliver *disequilibrium*, the exact opposite of the effect intended. By negotiating an arms-control agreement, the president has shifted the tectonic plates of the Middle East order. And for tectonic plates, it takes a move of just inches to level whole cities.

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