

The Saudis and Israelis Know Best

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 25, 2013



Early Sunday morning in Geneva, Switzerland, the United States, the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, and Germany (the P5+1) signed a temporary agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran that requires Tehran for the next six months to cease expanding its nuclear program but does not require it to cease enriching uranium to low levels or to dismantle existing enrichment capabilities. In exchange, the P5 +1 will release billions of dollars of frozen Iranian assets.

The New York Times reports that “Iran did not agree to all of the intrusive inspection regime that the International Atomic Energy Agency had said was needed to ensure that the Iranian program is peaceful.”

Two American allies who know the region well are convinced that Iran’s nuclear program is fundamentally military in nature, that the Iranians are taking American-led negotiators to the cleaners, and that Iran’s aim is to buy the time necessary to achieve its military objective.

Alas, it is not just an intimate understanding of their region that has given Israel and Saudi Arabia good grounds to deplore any agreement that, at this very late date, makes concessions to Iran for anything less than elimination of its nuclear weapons-making capabilities. It is also the confused and feckless conduct of Obama administration foreign policy in the Middle East.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu harshly criticized the agreement as a “historic mistake” that made the world “much more dangerous.”

In an interview in the Wall Street Journal the day before the agreement was signed, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, an influential member of the Saudi royal family and the Arab world’s richest businessman, asserted that disagreement about how to deal with Iran has caused relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States to sink to their lowest point in more than 30 years.

Misguided American foreign policy, the prince explained, had generated a surprising de facto alliance in the Middle East. Contrary to the Obama administration, which has proceeded from the entrenched left-liberal conviction that stability in the Middle East depends on achieving a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, Prince Alwaleed declared that because of their common opposition to Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons and shared skepticism about American-led negotiations with Tehran, “for the first time, Saudi Arabian interests and Israel are almost parallel.”

To be sure, Tehran is suffering from severe economic sanctions championed by the United States. Yet Iran, which according to the U.S. State Department is the world’s most active state sponsor of terrorism, has been laboring for more than 25 years at facilities spread throughout the country -- some of which were kept secret to the extent possible and are located hundreds of feet underground -- to develop its nuclear program. Iran has done so despite its vast reserves of oil and natural gas and the high costs it has incurred, including the mysterious deaths of leading scientists, and unexplained explosions at laboratories and military bases. By most estimates, Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is only inches from the finish line.

From the Saudi and Israeli perspective, any agreement that does not require Iran to cease the enrichment of uranium and dismantle its facilities, including its heavy-water reactor at Arak -- which will be capable of producing plutonium, an alternative source for nuclear weapons -- will allow the patient and wily Iranian leadership to take the final steps necessary to secure the capacity to make nuclear weapons.

Alas, the conduct of Obama administration foreign policy gives substance to fears in Riyadh and Jerusalem that Iran will win the negotiations.

First, despite the many promises that President Obama made during his campaign for the presidency in 2008 and repeated during his first term in office that the military option to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is on the table, the president’s actions in office have undermined the all-important credibility of his threat to use force.

Obama rose to power by encouraging Americans to believe they were weary of war. This required a concerted rhetorical operation because only a tiny proportion of Americans serve in the nation’s armed forces and many Americans, particularly in “blue-state” America, are not even acquainted with anybody who serves.

Once in office, Obama undermined the credibility of an American military option by his actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In December 2009, he announced in a speech at West Point that he would both send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda and would begin bringing troops home 18 months later.

The president's mixed message powerfully conveyed his administration's ambivalence: 30,000 troops were fewer than Obama's generals believed were sufficient to accomplish the task. And by announcing in advance the date on which the United States would start to draw down troops -- an assurance intended to allay the anxieties of the president's anti-war base at home -- Obama informed our adversaries that all they need do was lie low until we leave.

Then, by withdrawing all troops from Iraq in 2011 against the wishes of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who wanted a small contingent of U.S. troops to remain, the Obama administration indicated that even a very limited military presence in Iraq aimed at bolstering the Iraqi government's efforts to prevent domestic terrorism and Iranian-instigated violence was too high a price for America to pay.

Last August, with all the world watching, Obama managed to broadcast a deep-seated ambivalence about the use of force by dragging his feet in response to Syria's violation of the red line he had publicly drawn against the use of chemical weapons. Then the president declared his intention to punish Syria with a military strike. Then he decided to ask for congressional approval. Then he abruptly short-circuited congressional deliberations by choosing instead to follow Russian President Vladimir Putin's lead and negotiate with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an undoubted perpetrator of war crimes, for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons.

Against this dismaying backdrop, the president's aggressive use of drones to kill terrorists is not likely to instill fear of American resolve in the hearts of Iran's ayatollahs.

Second, Obama has repeatedly created false expectations in the Middle East only to see his major pronouncements and signature policies exposed as naïve. His engagement of the Iranians during his first year in office was met in Iran by indifference at best; as Saudis and Israelis predicted at the time, it led nowhere.

The president's greatly heralded June 2009 Cairo speech promised a dramatic new beginning to relations not merely between America and Egypt or the Arab world but with the entirety of Islam. The speech has had no observable impact on Islamic hearts and minds in the Middle East or beyond.

During his first term, the president's ballyhooed determination to compel Israelis and Palestinians to make peace generated four years of bad blood on both sides. Second-term efforts led by Secretary of State John Kerry to relaunch negotiations seem to have gained little traction among the parties and excited scant interest in the region

In January 2011, shortly after uprisings began to sweep across Arab states, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reaffirmed U.S. support for longtime American ally, pro-Western Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Within weeks, to the consternation of Saudi Arabia and Israel, Obama was demanding that our suddenly erstwhile ally leave office.

Despite Saudi and Israeli warnings that the uprisings would empower the Islamists, Obama welcomed the Arab spring as the outbreak of freedom and democracy. But he stood by as the Islamists swept to power in Egypt and as the tyrant in Syria waged a devastating war against his people.

Third, the administration has made scaling back America's role in the Middle East a major tenet of its foreign policy. Despite her reputation as a proponent of military intervention to defend human rights, upon assuming office last July National Security Adviser Susan Rice led a review of administration priorities that resulted in a demotion of the Middle East.

While it is indisputable that America has vital national security interests around the world, such public downplaying of an established priority, especially when it is trumpeted in a New York Times interview, as this one was last month, suggests to Middle East allies and adversaries that the president does not mean business, that invocations of military force were a bluff, and that he has better things to do than to ensure that Iran does not acquire the capacity to build nuclear weapons.

And surely our allies and adversaries in the Middle East cannot have failed to notice the Obamacare debacle. This has exposed at a minimum the president's managerial incompetence and at worst his willingness to systematically deceive.

Putting it all together, how can our allies and adversaries in the Middle East not view the Obama administration as overmatched by events, arrogant, vacillating, impatient, distracted, and timid?

Accordingly, it is hard to resist the conclusion drawn by the Saudis and Israelis that Tehran is proceeding in the reasonable expectation that an American-brokered temporary agreement that trades a pause in enrichment for desperately needed billions is an important step forward in the Islamic Republic of Iran's decades-long quest to achieve the capacity to build nuclear weapons.

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