

Obama and Iran: A Misguided Messianic Mission

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By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

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On August 3, Wall Street Journal reporters Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee broke a story suggesting that contrary to longstanding U.S. policy, the Obama administration paid the Islamic Republic of Iran a ransom for the return of Americans held captive.

“The Obama administration secretly organized an airlift of \$400 million worth of cash to Iran that coincided with the January release of four Americans detained in Tehran,” Solomon and Lee wrote. “Wooden pallets stacked with euros, Swiss francs and other currencies,” U.S. and European officials told the journalists, “were flown into Iran on an unmarked cargo plane.”

The WSJ piece dutifully carried the administration’s denial that the cash was a quid pro quo for the hostages. It was rather, according to officials, “the first installment of a \$1.7 billion settlement the Obama administration reached with Iran to resolve a decades-old dispute over a failed arms deal signed just before the 1979 fall of Iran’s last monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.”

The following day, President Obama went further. In a news conference at the Pentagon, he said it “defies logic” to think he’d pay ransom for hostages. The president also ridiculed media interest in the WSJ story, dismissing it as old news, while adding that the only fresh fact was that the payment to the mullahs was in cash. His critics, he sneered, were caught up in that detail as if it were part of “a spy novel.”

On Aug. 18, however, Solomon and Lee produced another scoop: It turns out that Obama’s smug denials notwithstanding, the hostage release and the cash payment were closely coordinated (the plane ferrying the cash, moreover, was linked to the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). This revelation led to an exchange between reporters and State Department spokesman John Kirby that brought the administration’s account more in line with reality:

Q: “In basic English, you are saying you wouldn’t give [Iran] the 400 million in cash until the prisoners were released, correct?”

A: “That’s correct,” Kirby responded.

But there are broader questions about the Obama administration's Iran dealings than dissembling about the mechanics of hostage negotiations. They form a substantial part of Jay Solomon's painstakingly reported book, "The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals That Reshaped the Middle East." It shows that the Obama administration's far-fetched denials of ransom payment are part and parcel of more fundamental problems.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action -- the July 2015 Vienna agreement between Iran, on one side, and, on the other, the United States, the other four permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, Germany, and the European Union -- was for the Obama administration, Solomon writes, "the most important initiative of its second term and the defining foreign policy legacy of Barack Obama's presidency."

Solomon stresses, "President Obama, from his first days in office, pursued an opening to Iran and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei with an obsessive commitment."

To win Ayatollah Khamenei's trust, Obama withheld support for the spontaneous democratic uprising against the corrupt June 2009 Iranian presidential election. The administration also deceived the public by undertaking secret negotiations with Iran and conducting outreach and talks "behind the backs of the Security Council and the United States' closest Middle East allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia."

During negotiations — both those conducted openly and those done surreptitiously — Obama's diplomatic team, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, made numerous, significant, unreciprocated concessions. And to avoid antagonizing Khamenei, Obama decided that America should stand by and do practically nothing as Syria's president and Iranian client, Bashar al-Assad, slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, wounded more than a million others, and drove in excess of 12 million Syrians from their homes.

A Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent for nearly two decades, Solomon is an old-school reporter who regards his principal mission as getting the story right. On the basis of extensive and courageous reporting from the Middle East and assiduous coverage of the ebb and flow of power in Washington, he discloses the multiple dimensions—political, diplomatic, economic, military, and clandestine—of America's post-9/11 struggles with Iran. Although Obama was determined to correct what he regarded as George W. Bush's mistakes in the Middle East, the 44th president's policies resembled, in a crucial respect, the 43rd's: Both vied with, Solomon's book reveals, an adversary we didn't understand.

Obama thought he was replacing a foolish war with smart diplomacy. But a central question Solomon's book explores is whether that approach was effective. His scrupulous reporting will do much to corroborate the judgment of those who believe that, for the sake of Obama's supposedly crowning foreign policy achievement, the president paid much too high a price.

“Iran, under the deal, agreed to cap or reduce large parts of its nuclear infrastructure, including the number of centrifuges enriching uranium as well as its stockpile of fissile material, for at least a decade,” Solomon writes. “It also agreed to enhance the ability of the U.N.’s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to access and monitor Iran’s nuclear sites to guard against Tehran secretly developing atomic weapons.”

In exchange, the United States and its coalition “rolled back the crippling economic sanctions they had imposed on Iran over the past decade.” But is Iran likely to honor the deal? Will the United States be able, as Obama promised, to snap back sanctions if Iran violates its obligations? Did the deal make the Middle East safer?

The evidence gathered by Solomon indicates that the answer to these questions is no.

Desperate to strike a deal to avoid the embarrassment of betraying the president’s promise to employ military force to block Iran’s path to a nuclear weapon, the administration acquiesced to a cascading series of Iranian demands. Instead of requiring the complete dismantlement of Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities, the administration agreed to their reduction and regulation. Instead of banning the development of ballistic missiles, whose main purpose could only be the delivery of nuclear weapons, the administration permitted it. Instead of barring weapons trading, the administration allowed it.

These and other concessions have left Iran, should it cheat, approximately one year away from producing a nuclear weapon and, under the agreement, free to do so in 15 years.

They have also emboldened Iran’s export of its Shia Islamic extremism throughout the region. The Islamic Republic has increased its arming and training of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. In addition, it agreed to Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria on behalf of Assad. Last week, Russian long-range bombers for the first time used Iranian air bases to strike the Syrian opposition.

Furthermore, consenting to Iran’s retention of a nuclear program infrastructure threatens to spark a regional nuclear arms race as America’s Sunni Muslim allies conclude that they cannot count on the United States to defend their vital national security interests.

Solomon observes that “at the heart of Obama’s philosophy was a sense that” his administration “had righted history” with the Iran deal. That’s a messianic sense. From paying what bears an uncanny resemblance to ransom, to disregarding state sponsorship of terrorism and declining to confront epic state brutality, to triggering nuclear proliferation in the name of nonproliferation, what will a messianic sense not justify?

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.

