

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

The political psychology of Obama's Iran policy

Reza Marashi

1/10/2012

Washington, DC, United States - The Obama administration spent much of 2009 implementing a historic policy shift towards Iran. To its credit, a noticeable change in tone on the part of the US government *vis-a-vis* Iran was followed by private messages from President Obama to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on how the US and Iran might practically set up dialogue.

Then-Undersecretary for Political Affairs William Burns met privately with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, emphasising the United States' desire for dialogue and finding new ways to engage on a range of issues - nuclear and otherwise.

After an interim confidence-building measure was agreed upon, Tehran balked. It was unable to sell the agreement at home in amid intense political fratricide.

With Congress coming at the Obama administration like a steamroller, Washington quietly abandoned diplomacy in favour of punitive measures. In 2010, the US withdrew its initial support for a revised confidence-building measure brokered by Turkey and Brazil, and instead led the charge for a new UN Security Council sanctions resolution.

The last meeting between Iran and the **P5+1**, in January 2011, ended with both sides refusing to budge from their respective entrenched positions. Since then, a powder keg overflowing with sanctions, stuxnet viruses, secret assassinations and dangerous threats of war have shown how easily a single incident can spark a wider conflict.

How did the "mutual interest and mutual respect" of 2009 revert back to "all options are on the

table" in 2012?

Privately, senior US officials acknowledge they underestimated both the obstacles to normalising relations with Iran, and the difficulty of understanding Iranian government's decision-making. Yet these same officials increasingly believe that recycling demonstrably failed policies of pressure and containment will provide leverage, bring Iran to the negotiating table and perhaps hasten the end of the regime. As the drumbeat of war intensifies, it is crucial to understand the political psychology of Obama's Iran policy.

The turning point

Despite their best efforts, Turkey and Brazil had little chance of securing nuclear concessions from Iran that the US would have deemed acceptable. In private telephone conversations prior to the May 2010 Tehran summit, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered tough messages to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and then-Brazilian President Lula da Silva: go to Tehran, see for yourself that Iran is not interested in a deal, then get on board with the UN sanctions process.

Rather than capitalise on Iranian concessions and test the Islamic Republic's ability to follow through, the Turkish-Brazilian initiative was perceived by Washington as part of a larger Iranian strategy to divide the international community and give sanctions naysayers something to hang their hats on.

As the United States built up support for new UN sanctions in late 2009 and early 2010, most administration officials privately accepted the improbability of securing "yes" votes from Turkey, Brazil or Lebanon. Only a minority inside the administration argued that the troika would support a new sanctions resolution precisely because of how watered down it was.

The US acknowledged from the outset that any new Security Council resolution would be watered down and lack unanimity, with significant portions written in non-binding language.

Thus, UN Security Council sanctions secured in June 2010 under Obama's watch must be considered a failure - after nearly two years of working closely with the international community on Iran policy, the administration failed to secure a resolution as robust as the previous three ushered in by the wildly unpopular Bush administration.

The US pushed forward with a sanctions-based approach largely because key administration officials believed that sanctions strengthened the credibility and leverage of those who wanted to engage Iran, while preventing more violent actions by Israel.

They insisted that such an approach best addressed the myriad long-term mutual interests shared by the US and Iran. President Obama himself reached the conclusion that there were too few negative incentives to affect Iran's internal calculus, particularly regarding mutual interests. Based on this rationale, a policy of increasing pressure on Iran was constructed, predicated on the assumption that pressure would:

- Bring the Iranians to the negotiating table
- Affect Iran's internal calculus
- Strengthen the credibility and leverage of the pro-engagement camps
- Prevent more violent actions by Israel

As a general matter, senior administration officials believe US leverage *vis-a-vis* Iran is at its highest immediately before a new set of sanctions hits, which in turn provides political space to carry out "low-key engagement activities" with Iran. To date, few such activities have taken place, largely because US outreach has been reactive rather than proactive, so as to avoid impairing sanctions implementation.

Bush administration redux?

Despite its push for new sanctions, the vast majority of Obama administration officials privately acknowledge that sanctions are not a policy in and of themselves - even if they have in fact become the only policy pursued. This disconnect is reflective of the existing divisions on Iran within the White House, the absence of a concrete policy towards Iran and a reliance on tactics rather than strategy.

Over the past three years, two schools of thought about Iran have emerged within the administration. The first camp equates US security with Iranian democracy. It seeks to hasten a "colour" revolution in Iran by emphasising human rights and fortifying opposition groups in hopes of gaining the trust of the Iranian people and encouraging them to rebel.

The second camp points out that the US and Iran share too many common interests to ignore, including on Iraq and Afghanistan, among others. The resulting policy has become an attempt at compromise - publicly reiterating US commitment to diplomacy, but applying pressure to tip the scale to the more hardline end.

Most US officials believe keeping Iran's file in the UN Security Council (a political body) versus the IAEA (a technical body) supports a legal case for punitive measures by providing concrete evidence on the diversion of Iran's civilian nuclear programme toward military use. Nevertheless, these same officials acknowledge that Russia and China will veto any severe economic sanctions.

The Obama administration also realises that a military attack on Iran's nuclear installations by the United States or Israel remains a tough sell outside of Washington, London, Paris and Tel Aviv, as none of the aforementioned capitals have found the proverbial "smoking gun".

Here, senior Obama administration officials privately acknowledge two key points:

- A preference for continuing to incrementally increase both Security Council and "coalition of the willing" sanctions
- The risk/benefit ratio of an attack does not make sense, particularly losing the "pro-

American" people of Iran

As such, in the future, the US will likely move forward with a policy of "coalition of the willing" sanctions with the EU and other allies, targeting Iran's financial and energy sector - foreign investment and financial transactions between Iran and multi-national corporations, including banks.

Together with Security Council resolutions, these unilateral sanctions seek to tighten the screws on Iran and reduce its financial manoeuvrability. Yet few in the Obama administration believe this mix of punitive measures will compel Iran to change its policies or behaviour. Beyond the existing policy of sanctions, the administration does not have a policy in place for moving forwards.

The military's growing influence

US Central Command (CENTCOM) - the combatant command responsible for overseeing US security interests in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa - has standard planning objectives that provide the president with a set of military options to deal with Iran.

At present, there are essentially three scenarios for Obama to choose from:

- Punish Iran for its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and support for terrorism
- Set back Iran's nuclear programme as significantly as possible
- Contain and change the Iranian regime

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey and CENTCOM Commander James Mattis, whose areas of command include Iraq and Afghanistan, have a keen interest in Iran because of its regional influence. For these reasons, they know that war with Iran is not viable - risking regional chaos and breaking the back of the US military.

Privately, Dempsey and Mattis both acknowledge that sanctions will also not work because they fail to achieve the primary US objective - changing Iranian government policies and behaviour. As a result, these men will be a leading voice inside the Obama administration, publicly encouraging diplomacy and communication while privately probing an unofficial long-term policy of containment and below-the-radar efforts to destabilise the Iranian government.

As the US moves away from sustained diplomatic engagement with the Iranian government, US military commanders will become an increasingly important voice on Iran policy - perhaps trumped only by President Obama himself.

Dempsey and Mattis are particularly influential. Nobody on the political right can attack them, few can say "no" to them and they have a nearly unrivalled ability to convince Congress and the administration on key national security issues. Even Obama is inclined to go along with their recommendations - a president can rarely go wrong politically when he says: "I'm going to listen to my generals."

Neither Obama nor his generals will advocate for the military to engage in the first two CENTCOM scenarios. In their view, the likelihood of failure far outweighs the chances of success. However, all three men increasingly believe that developing a strategy for the third scenario - containing and changing the regime - will provide political cover for the US to avoid engaging in kinetic tactics.

They acknowledge the "moderate risk" associated with influence operations and support for opposition groups inside Iran, but nonetheless seek to better understand what outreach to the various facets of Iran's disenchanted society might look like, including to opposition politicians, major industry, labour and transportation unions, government employees, bazaar merchants and oil workers.

They also seek to understand how the US can help these amorphous groups organise and coalesce. This long-term policy option is seen as providing flexibility, even if plans go awry. Barring a major and unforeseen Iranian concession on the nuclear front, this policy trajectory will be difficult to disrupt.

The US track record of implementing containment and destabilisation policies worldwide is far from noteworthy. In the case of Iran, it is abysmal.

With no on-the-ground presence and restricted interaction with Iranian counterparts, the US is largely unable to accurately assess the real strengths and weaknesses of any policy. As a result, US policy towards Iran under the Obama administration is rapidly falling prey to the same entrapments and mistakes that overwhelmed the four preceding US administrations.