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Obama Follows Bush on Iran

By Muhammad Sahimi

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When Barack Obama was running for the presidency in 2008, he wanted, first and foremost, to differentiate himself from George W. Bush, who was despised by a large majority of people practically everywhere on this planet. Obama had opposed the invasion of Iraq, and during his campaign he continued to criticize the invasion and its aftermath. He criticized the Bush administration for what he considered its neglect of the “right war” (if there is such a war), namely, the war in Afghanistan. And while the Bush administration conducted a relentless program of propaganda and threats against Iran for eight years, Obama offered to negotiate with Iran without any preconditions. To make his offer sound credible, he even [quoted President John F. Kennedy](#): “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

But offering to negotiate with a country with no preconditions but also without any change in fundamental views about that country is meaningless. For example, the Obama administration did not demand that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program before entering negotiations over [swapping its low-enriched uranium \(LEU\)](#) with fuel for Tehran’s research reactor (TRR), which provides medical isotopes for 850,000 ill Iranians. But the administration’s goal, like its predecessor’s, has always been to dismantle Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities and program. What is the difference between demanding the suspension of the enrichment program *before* entering the negotiating room and demanding the same *right after* entering the room? Just passing through the door!

But the Iranians have always made it clear that they would not give up their uranium enrichment program. This has nothing to do with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other Tehran hardliners. The reformists and the opposition leaders, most notably former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, also have the same position, except that they would pursue diplomatic negotiations calmly if they were in power, instead of making inflammatory statements like Ahmadinejad. In fact, [Mousavi harshly criticized the negotiations for the nuclear fuel swap](#).

So, why did President Obama ever think that his approach toward Iran would result in an outcome to his liking? Because he has a nice smile, or he is an African-American, or his middle name is Hussein, the same as that of Prophet Muhammad's grandson and one of the most revered figures in Iran and Shi'ite Islam? None of that has helped, because his policy is ill-conceived.

Trying to seem different from George W. Bush while pursuing the same goals with Iran has created severe problems for Obama. Since taking office, Obama has paid lip service to negotiating with Tehran, while concentrating the efforts of his administration on beefing up the sanctions against Iran. The excuse is that if the [sanctions are not tougher, Israel will attack Iran](#), which the administration supposedly opposes, although it has refused to take the option of attacking Iran off the table. The duality has led to one blunder after another.

First, Obama set an artificial deadline of December 2009 for his diplomatic approach to Iran to bear fruit, without considering the dynamics of Iran's internal politics or even the pace of progress that Iran was making in its uranium enrichment program. Iran was, and still is, in turmoil over the [presidential](#) election of June 2009. The disputed election has not only pitted the hardliners against the reformists led by [Mousavi](#), [Mehdi Karroubi](#), and former president Mohammad Khatami, it [has created deep fissures](#) in the conservative and hard-line camp. Thus, both the ruling establishment and the opposition are preoccupied with Iran's domestic politics.

At the same time, Iran's progress in expanding its uranium enrichment program has slowed down. Although a second enrichment facility is now under construction in [Fordow near Qom](#), the facility is safeguarded by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and will not come online for at least another year. The Obama administration claimed that the Fordow facility represents a violation of Iran's obligations toward its Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, but as the [author](#) and [others](#) have explained, Iran did not violate its obligations. At the same time, technical difficulties and other problems [have slowed down](#) the Natanz uranium enrichment facility. Only about half of the nearly 8,000 installed centrifuges at Natanz have been working. Therefore, the artificial deadline was simply counterproductive, and meant only to appease the Israel lobby.

Next came the [rejection of the agreement](#) that Iran reached with Turkey and Brazil to swap a little over half of its stockpile of LEU with nuclear fuel for the TRR. The administration, determined to punish Iran, pushed for the approval of [Resolution 1929](#) of United Nations Security Council. Afterward, the U.S. rebuked Turkey and demanded that

it mind its own business [and not interfere in the affairs of a superpower](#). Then, even though the leaders of Iran's Green Movement had made their total opposition to sanctions crystal clear, the administration [imposed its own new set of sanctions on Iran](#). Although the sanctions are supposed to be targeted at the regime, they are hurting ordinary Iranians.

Next, the administration did nothing to put an end to all the speculation and propaganda about Israel and/or the U.S. [attacking Iran](#). Jeffrey Goldberg, the propagandist whose "journalistic" career took off when he published [a long article](#) in the *New Yorker* about nonexistent links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, authored [a recent article](#) in *The Atlantic* about how Israel might attack Iran, and soon. Even Goldberg had to acknowledge that it is not Iran's nonexistent nuclear arsenal that scares the Israeli political and military elite; rather, an Iranian nuclear capability may encourage the scientific and technological elite to leave Israel, the same point that [I made](#) much earlier. Though sober analysts and experts such as [Trita Parsi](#), [Glenn Greenwald](#), [Reza Aslan](#), and [Bernard Avishai](#) have confronted the Israel lobby's saber-rattling, the administration did nothing to end all the speculation about a war with Iran. The president, who is presumably against going to war with Iran, does not seem to recognize that if the Israel lobby cannot persuade him to attack Iran, they are, as Parsi pointed out, putting a narrative in place that will allow the next president to do so.

Another blunder of the administration is its lack of understanding of Iran's internal dynamics. In addition to the fissures that have emerged in the ruling establishment after last year's presidential election, the most radical elements among Iran's hardliners do not actually mind a limited military exchange with the U.S. and/or Israel. Despite claims by the neoconservatives, such attacks will not topple the hardliners in Tehran. But they would not only deflect the Iranian people's attention from the internal problems and force them to rally around the hardliners, they would also give the hardliners the perfect excuse to wipe out the opposition and [set back Iran's democratic movement for decades](#). All the talk about going to war with Iran only helps Tehran's hardliners.

Now, as we approach the midterm congressional elections, Obama has no incentive to take any positive steps to address the standoff with Iran. Politically, he is weak. The economy is still a mess. The war in Afghanistan – the "right" war in Obama's view – does not show any sign of progress (regardless of how progress is defined), and the proclamation of the end of the Iraq War is bogus. No one believes that the U.S. will leave Iraq any time soon. Obama seems to have lost any interest in a negotiated settlement with Iran, and last year's promise of peaceful accommodation with the Islamic world [has not resulted in any significant positive result](#). There are dire predictions that the elections will result in the Republicans taking control of the House and possibly the Senate. If that happens, the president will be in an even weaker position.

Negotiations between Iran and the so-called Vienna group are supposed [to begin later this month](#) at IAEA headquarters. But even if the negotiations start, will they merely be going through the motions so that the U.S. and its allies can claim that they "tried" diplomacy with Iran, but it failed, or will they be a genuine effort to address the issue?

If the president did one good thing about Iran, it was the fact that he did not involve his administration in Iran's internal strife and did not side with the opposition after last year's election. Iran's democratic movement neither needs nor has even asked for U.S. government support. In fact, the movement is fiercely nationalist and still resents past U.S. interventions in Iran. In addition, any public expression of support by the U.S. government for democratic groups would be tantamount to a kiss of death for the Green Movement.

But even then, the president committed a blunder. Not taking sides is not the same as being silent about the gross violations of human rights of the people of Iran that occur on a daily basis. Although the U.S. and its allies do not have a stellar record when it comes to defending human rights, as they have committed numerous offenses themselves from Guantanamo to Bagram and extraordinary renditions by the CIA, they can still protest the violations in Iran. They can remind the hardliners in Tehran that just as they invoke the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty when they state Iran's rights to uranium enrichment technology, they also have obligations under other international treaties that Iran has signed, including all those regarding human rights.

So, once again, a U.S. president is succumbing to internal pressure by the Israel lobby and its allies and, instead of reaching a negotiated settlement with Iran, is following the same type of failed policies of the past. Once again, a U.S. president does not recognize that such a settlement will greatly benefit Iran's democratic movement, which, in turn, will have strongly positive effects in the entire Middle East. And, once again, a U.S. president, despite his considerable intellect and good heart, is continuing on a path that may finally take this nation to war with Iran.