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[Article 1.](#)

The Washington Post

## **The U.S. undercuts its own power in Iran nuclear talks**

Ray Takeyh

18 Feb. 2014 -- In an all-too-familiar ritual of diplomacy, the great powers and Iran will gather in Vienna on Tuesday to hammer out a comprehensive nuclear agreement. There will be lofty rhetoric about mutual understanding and mutual compromise. All sides will be advised to desist from their maximalist demands, as the best that can be achieved is an ambiguous accord that leaves Iran short of nuclear arms but still having made great strides toward nuclear capability. Such seemingly sober calculations miss the fact that the United States is not dealing with the Soviet Union but a beleaguered middling power that may still be coerced into more expansive concessions.

In more than a decade of nuclear diplomacy, some analysts have persistently advised Washington to seek a compromise solution that concedes important aspects of Iran's nuclear program. Excessive demands, the thinking holds, would [fracture the Western alliance that has generated an impressive sanctions regime](#). Moreover, this thinking continues, Tehran may walk away from the table, raising the specter of another conflict in the Middle East. The sensibilities of U.S. allies and the temperament of the mullahs are as important as proliferation imperatives. The final agreement may not be ideal, this mind-set concludes, but it will preserve the cohesion of the alliance and impose some restraints on Iran's nuclear trajectory. Such postulations misunderstand the lure of U.S. commerce and the primacy of U.S. power. It is true that European sanctions have been an indispensable complement to U.S. efforts to drain Iran's coffers. However, should Washington insist on stringent nuclear terms, it is unlikely that the Europeans would resume large-scale investments in Iran. The various sanctions bills passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama have a secondary aspect: If enforced, a European bank or oil firm that concludes an agreement with Iran would be denied access to U.S. markets. The sizable U.S. economy will always trump whatever deals the Islamic republic is offering. To be sure, Europe's business executives will complain and its intellectual elite will castigate the United States as an arrogant hyper-power, but in the end they will comply with U.S. prohibitions. Some have suggested that the essential "red lines" of Iran's supreme leader, the [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#), must be taken into consideration as they are unlikely to be adjusted. Western negotiators would be wise not to insist that Iran ship out its stockpiled enriched uranium or [shutter its many nuclear](#)

[installations](#). The rise of [pragmatists such as President Hassan Rouhani](#) may have made Iran prone to a compromise, but Khamenei still lurks behind the moderates — and his basic injunctions have to be respected. The supreme leader and his hard-core disciples have withstood the pressure of sanctions and threats of military retribution; they may finally be ready for an accommodation with the West, but they will not abandon their nuclear aspirations altogether. In seeking an accord, negotiators should not make perfection the enemy of good enough.

Yet a close reading of Iran's political scene over the past few years reveals that Khamenei's most important red line has not been on the nuclear issue but on preventing moderates from regaining political power. In the aftermath of the fraudulent presidential election of 2009, Khamenei spent the next four years ranting against the so-called secessionists and accusing reformers of colluding with the West to undermine the theocratic state. Plots, conspiracies, fifth columns and subversives became the staple of Khamenei's rhetoric. It appeared that the supreme leader would go to any length to prevent the office of the presidency from being reclaimed by those who did not slavishly conform to his ideological strictures. And then came the 2013 election, by which time the sentiments among Iranians at large had shifted away from the conservative perspective. Confronted with the prospect of enforcing these red lines through massive violence, Khamenei grudgingly opted for the presidency of Rouhani. Khamenei may not be a pragmatist, but he can be prudent — and faced with real threats to his power, he will retreat from well-delineated positions.

There is no tolerable end to Iran's nuclear imbroglio other than a negotiated settlement. Given the disparity of power between the United States and Iran, Washington has an opportunity to craft a durable accord for arms control while preserving its coercive leverage. Such are the advantages of being a superpower with the world's largest economy and intact alliances. But for that to happen, the United States must stop underestimating its power and overestimating its adversary's resilience.

[Article 2.](#)

Los Angeles Times

# The coming crash of American diplomacy in the Middle East

John Bolton

February 18, 2014 -- President [Obama](#) has three significant Middle East diplomatic initiatives underway, treating, respectively, Iran's nuclear weapons program; Syria's deadly, exhausting conflict; and the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Into these [negotiations](#), Obama and his administration have poured enormous amounts of American prestige, time and effort.

Although rarely considered collectively, these three efforts constitute a significant strategic package for a [White House](#) that all too often hardly bothers with foreign policy. These initiatives truly reflect Obama's view of America's international role: His is a world of rhetoric and talk, not power. Thus, Iran has not feared [U.S. military](#) strikes against its nuclear weapons program, and now, as a result of November's interim agreement in Geneva, it does not even fear international economic sanctions. Neither the [Bashar Assad](#) regime nor Al Qaeda terrorists in Syria see any prospect of material U.S. intervention. And the main pressure being applied in the Israeli-Palestinian matter is against Israel, heretofore Washington's strongest regional ally.

As described below, all three of Obama's diplomatic maneuvers are based on errors and will almost certainly fail. And what will happen then? Failing on one is bad enough, but failing on all three will be devastating.

And it is no answer to say that deals may yet be signed. Covering failure with a piece of paper changes nothing. The Iran interim agreement, for example, is not a partial success simply because its later collapse will be due merely to poor implementation. Without a real meeting of minds, there is no true deal, as Iran's all-too-evident disdain already amply demonstrates.

The coming crash of U.S. diplomacy is not idle speculation about a remote future. Our declining prestige is already apparent globally; when all three Middle East negotiations fail conclusively, America's influence will fall further. Friends and adversaries alike are recalibrating their policies

accordingly, particularly because the underlying causes of the three impending failures will spell trouble and misfortune elsewhere.

Obama's ongoing failures could have been avoided. A less ideological, more realistic and clear-eyed leader would comprehend American power and interests, knowing how to use the former to protect the latter, rather than making Obama's basic mistakes.

Obama's first error: misreading your adversary. There was never any chance Iran could be negotiated out of a nuclear weapons capability it has pursued for nearly 30 years. Efforts during the Clinton and [George W. Bush](#) administrations demonstrated how Iran deftly uses negotiations to gain political legitimacy, buy time to continue work on its [nuclear program](#) and evade international punishment. [Hassan Rouhani](#) followed precisely this playbook as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator 10 years ago. He is doing so again today as Iran's president.

The second error: not knowing who your adversaries are. Obama argued for three years that Russia shared his objective of a peaceful transition from the Assad regime in Syria to something else. This was never true. Moscow's support for Assad (as well as Iran's, directly and through Hezbollah) guaranteed he would only depart feet first. The U.S. could either have aided Syria's opposition or tackled the problem's root cause: the mullahs' regime in Tehran. Obama chose to do neither. His equivocation regarding Syria's chemical weapons program has provoked giggles or dismay at White House weakness.

The third error: not knowing who your friends are. The Palestinians lack legitimate governing institutions capable of hard decisions, including making perilous concessions and compromises, and overcoming resistance by  [Hamas](#) and other terrorists. Without such institutions, no long-term solution is possible. Negotiating with the [Palestinian Authority](#) has less substance than negotiating with a hologram. Perversely, however, Obama treats Israel as the problem.

Not apprehending these realities or foreseeing their consequences debilitates the United States, discourages its allies and emboldens its adversaries. The coming collapse of all three of Obama's negotiations will convince foreign governments that his policies are dooming Washington's Middle East influence to precipitous decline. And since appearance is reality in international politics, America's ability to influence events — in

Egypt for example, where the military government is already reverting to pre-Sadat days, purchasing arms from Russia — will sink further. Moreover, the opportunity costs of not focusing on threats elsewhere, such as China's belligerent territorial claims in its coastal waters, are enormous. Iran will emerge more powerful, verging on deliverable nuclear weapons, while still financing and arming terrorists worldwide. Assad seems likely to survive, which is bad enough by itself, but it will be compounded by the affirmation it affords Iranian and Russian strength. Israel will trust Washington even less than now, and ironically, Palestinians will be even more anti-American because Obama will not be able to deliver to them the Israeli concessions he predicted. Perhaps this prospect of massive strategic failure will awaken Obama and America as a whole, but that seems unlikely. Instead, the increasing danger is that only another [9/11](#), another disaster, will produce the necessary awakening. There is tragedy ahead for our country if we continue on this course.

*John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the [REDACTED], is a senior fellow at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) and the author of "Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad."*

[Article 3.](#)

Al Jazeera

## **Iran's long and winding road to lifting the sanctions**

[Akbar Ganji](#)

February 17, 2014 -- The Geneva Accord between Iran and P5+1 went into effect on January 20, but the debate still rages in Iran. For Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, uranium enrichment is a red line that he will not relinquish. The conservatives view the Accord very negatively, whereas the supporters of Hassan Rouhani administration consider it a positive development.

In his struggle to see through the realisation of a comprehensive nuclear deal with the West, Iran's president will have to face not only Western

suspicion but also domestic opposition. Ultimately, however, the potential benefit to Iran from the deal is worth fighting for.

Undoubtedly, Western powers have double standards when dealing with Iran. They see no problem with the [200-300 nuclear bombs that Israel](#), a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), possesses. At the same time, US military aid has guaranteed Israel's strategic superiority over the entire region. This has enabled Benjamin Netanyahu [to use the dispute with Iran](#) to distract attention from the fact that Israel continues to occupy Palestinian land.

The unwise rhetoric employed by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about the Holocaust and Israel armed Israeli hardliners with the perfect excuse to encourage "[the most crippling economic sanctions](#)" on Iran, which have destroyed the fabric of Iranian society and [disrupted the lives](#) of tens of millions of ordinary Iranians.

Iran has made many concessions although under the NPT they are considered among its rights. It is true that the Geneva Accord has imposed on the country an inspection regime that is beyond Iran's Safeguards Agreement. However, given the current atmosphere of mistrust, the Rouhani administration had no choice but to halt some of the peaceful nuclear projects. Despite these concessions, the Accord has ultimately recognised Iran's rights to peaceful use of nuclear energy.

More difficult negotiations, however, are still ahead since the two sides have different interpretations of both the Geneva Accord and the NPT. Iran believes that the right to enrich uranium has been recognised by the Accord. US President Barack Obama administration [does not seem to oppose](#) Iran's enrichment of uranium at up to a level of 5 percent, but the powerful lobbies of [Israel and Saudi Arabia](#), and the extremists and warmongers in the US, are doing their utmost to see the Accord fail. If the Western powers do not recognise - in writing - Iran's right to uranium enrichment, the negotiations will fail. But, because both the US and the Iranian governments are committed to resolving the current diplomatic impasse, even if these negotiations stop, there will eventually be another attempt to restart them. That is to say, the [failure of the negotiations](#) will not necessarily mean immediate war.

A balancing act at home

In Iran, the nuclear deal has been met with different reactions on the political arena. The reformists, led by former President Mohammad Khatami, and the pragmatists, led by another former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, both support the Rouhani administration. Moderate conservatives [are not too enthusiastic about the president](#)[Pr], but a majority of them do not oppose the Geneva Accord.

The hardline conservatives, however, have fiercely attacked the Accord, claiming that Iran has made too many concessions, but has received very little in return. Some figures like Hossein Shariatmadari, Khamenei's appointee and the managing editor of "Kayhan", a conservative mouthpiece newspaper, have attacked the deal in the Iranian press.

Shariatmadari [wrote in an editorial](#) that the text of the Accord indicates that Iran will receive only \$4.8bn of its \$100bn in frozen accounts in foreign banks. Others, like Javad Karimi Ghoddoosi, a hardline Majles deputy and a retired Revolutionary Guard officer, have claimed that Khamenei feels the Accord does not guarantee Iran's right to enrich uranium.

To control these hardliners, Rouhani has no choice but to consolidate his working relationship with Khamenei who can easily rein in them, so long as he does not view the government as an opponent, and his red line for uranium enrichment in Iran is respected.

The Supreme Leader can easily control the hardliners, so long as he does not view the government as an opponent...

The hardliners do not have a significant social base of support, and instead present themselves as loyal supporters of Khamenei.

Thus, Khamenei's support for Rouhani's efforts disarms the hardliners. If, after inspections, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) certified that Iran's nuclear programme is peaceful, if Iran's right to produce low-enriched uranium was honoured, and if the economic sanctions were gradually lifted, the hardliners will be completely marginalised.

Hassan Rouhani's electoral victory is a hopeful sign. The hope is not that Iran would soon be democratised, but rather that it will be able to remove the shadow of war and end the sanctions. The Ahmadinejad administration squandered \$800bn in oil revenues, corrupted the state, and left behind billions of dollars in debt that the nation must now foot.

Less than six months after taking office, the Rouhani administration has halted the spiralling growth of inflation, as well as the contraction of the

economy. The lifting of some of the sanctions as a result of the Geneva Accord has made a positive psychological impact on the economy, and investment optimism has risen.

The promise of improved economic conditions is so important to ordinary Iranians that many of them support the nuclear negotiations and the bid to improve Iran's relations with Western powers and the Middle East.

Therefore, it is in Iran's national interest to advance a policy of detente with the US and its allies, as well as the Middle East.

The negotiations will be long. It will take years to create mutual trust, and for economic sanctions on Iran to be lifted. However, if the Rouhani administration continues advancing its foreign policy of peace with the world and improves the economy, the domestic situation will also change in favour of democratic forces.

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[Article 4.](#)

The Washington Post

## **Obama's failure to act on Syria**

[Richard Cohen](#)

February 18, 2014 -- The Obama doctrine in Syria [does not seem to be working](#). The country has fallen apart. Matters have gone from bad to worse. The secretary of state suggests that things are so bad [Barack Obama has asked for "options."](#) Three years into the war and the president wants a plan.

In all probability, Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian dictator, is not cowed by Obama threatening options. He continues to bomb his own people — barrel bombs, cluster bombs — and starve recalcitrant cities and regions into submission. The death toll has been hideous and Obama would like to do something about it, but he cannot until the options are drawn up, which

they have not been. So the people must starve until, possibly, a caravan of options arrives.

“He has asked all of us to think about various options that may or may not exist,” John Kerry said while in Beijing.

One can only imagine the profound effect this has had in Damascus, where Assad’s inner circle must be spending sleepless nights wondering about options that “may not exist.” Is this like the tooth fairy or maybe a new type of ray gun? Whatever it is, all over the Middle East, the toughest men imaginable — guys in sunglasses and Brioni suits — must be giggling. Options that “may not exist” has the sound of Bert Lahr as the Cowardly Lion in the “Wizard of Oz”: “Put ’em up. Put ’em up.”

For Lakhdar Brahimi, the United Nations mediator for Syria, this may come too late. He has failed to end the civil war if only because Assad won’t. (Assad even [seized the assets of the opposition’s negotiators](#) while they were in Geneva and [declared some of those negotiators to be terrorists](#).) Brahimi thought, as few leaders do, of actual Syrians. “[I am very, very sorry, and I apologize to the Syrian people](#),” he movingly said. Brahimi had done his best, but without the threat of force or sanctions or something to make Assad hurt, there was no way that the Syrian dictator would make peace. He is winning the ugly war in the ugliest fashion, and the Obama administration, among others, has stopped predicting that he will be gone in a fortnight, or whatever they say in Chicago.

Assad has already survived Obama’s dreaded red line, the very mention of which forced him to lie about removing his chemical weapons as soon as possible. And then Obama, having used the incredible might of the United States to force Assad into a prevarication, turned to Congress for authorization. This must have induced feverish vertigo in Assad. Congress? That tornado of babbling Babbitry — surely this was a trap of some kind. Why was the United States allowing mass murder to continue — [more than 140,000 estimated deaths](#) at last count, up from 120,000 in the fall? Why such impotence as Assad bulldozes whole neighborhoods, tortures with impunity and summarily executes the innocent as well as the guilty? Why, indeed?

Lebanon totters. Jordan drowns in refugees. Iraq has descended into ethnic chaos and its border with Syria is a mere rest stop for Islamic radicals. A

thug in Damascus does pretty much as he wants, providing a stellar example to bad guys the world over: Do whatever it takes. Nobody cares. [Six million people have been displaced](#). [Three million](#) have fled to neighboring countries. [Polio has broken out in refugee camps](#) (see a recent account in the [New York Review of Books](#)). The world does little to stop the fighting. The United States does next to nothing. Children die for lack of food or medicine. There is more than enough shame here to go around. Next month will mark the third anniversary of the Syrian civil war. A timely U.S. intervention that could have — no guarantees here — ended things early was ruled out by the president. Not even incremental steps to aid the moderate opposition (some cash or the grounding of helicopters that make war on civilians) have been taken. The left and the right embrace each other in the fervor of isolationism, confusing a humanitarian intervention with efforts by 19th-century Yanquis to make Central America safe for the United Fruit Co. America has not turned inward; it has turned downward — its head in the ground.

Washington's dawdling has become the hallmark of Obama's foreign policy. He can make all the speeches he wants, but his confusion and indecision is what other leaders notice and what history will remember. Now, so very late, he has asked for options. Here's one: Do something!

[Article 5.](#)

NYT

## **U.S. Steps Up Criticism of Russian Role in Syrian War**

Michael R. Gordon , David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt

February 17, 2014 -- Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates — Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) on Monday sharpened the Obama administration's mounting criticism of [Russia's](#) role in the escalating violence in [Syria](#), asserting that the Kremlin was undermining the prospects of a negotiated solution by “contributing so many more weapons” and political support to President [Bashar al-Assad](#).

“They're, in fact, enabling Assad to double down, which is creating an enormous problem,” [Mr. Kerry said](#) in Jakarta, Indonesia, before he flew

here to confer with top officials of the United Arab Emirates, a gulf state that has been a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition.

Mr. Kerry's tough criticism underscored the erosion of the Russian-American partnership in Syria, and raised questions about the viability of the United States' diplomatic strategy to help resolve the escalating crisis. [President Obama](#) has been deeply reluctant for nearly three years to get the United States directly involved in Syria's civil war, and pulled back the threat of cruise missile strikes in September after Mr. Assad's agreement to eliminate his chemical arsenal. While chemicals for making poison gas are leaving the country, behind schedule, Mr. Assad's conventional attacks on civilians have escalated significantly, and now Mr. Obama is calling for a review of what one senior official called "both old and new options" to bolster opposition forces and ease a desperate humanitarian crisis.

Administration officials, however, insist that those options do not include directly supplying more sophisticated, heavier armaments to the rebels, who are already receiving some weapons and training under a limited C.I.A. program, or carrying out airstrikes in a civil war that Mr. Obama fears could turn into a prolonged conflict. Instead, the United States is considering paying salaries to some of the rebel forces and providing more transportation and intelligence, American and European officials said. Mr. Assad's hold on power has grown over the past year, according to the head of American intelligence. Recognizing that a political settlement is unlikely if he keeps the advantage, administration officials said that Mr. Obama and other Western leaders had dropped their objections to proposals by Saudi Arabia and other countries to funnel more advanced weapons to vetted rebel groups, including portable anti-aircraft weapons, often called manpads.

A secret meeting in Washington last week among the intelligence chiefs from almost all of the countries attempting to oust the Assad government included extensive discussion about how to best provide that new lethal aid to rebel groups, the officials said. The gathering of the top intelligence officials from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Britain, France and the United Arab Emirates, and several others from the 11-nation group known as the Friends of Syria, reflected a belief that the diplomatic track has been exhausted unless Mr. Assad sustains significant military setbacks.

Mr. Kerry's pointed remarks on Russia's role were striking since it was Mr. Kerry who flew to Moscow in May, and the administration hoped that Russia would encourage the Syrian government to move toward a political settlement without Mr. Assad. After meeting with President [Vladimir V. Putin](#), Mr. Kerry announced that the United States and Russia would co-sponsor renewed peace talks in Geneva.

Those talks have now stalled. In August and September, the United States fleshed out and strengthened a Russian proposal that Syria's chemical arsenal be dismantled — a process now underway, but behind schedule — suggesting the countries could work together even while backing different sides in the war.

That comity, or at least a temporary alignment of interests, has now been set back. Mr. Obama was sharply critical of Russia in public statements over the past week, first at a news conference with President François Hollande of France and then at a meeting in California with King Abdullah II of Jordan. One senior Western official who discussed the issue with Mr. Obama last week said, "I've never seen him more frustrated — not only with the Russians, but with the failure of anything his own administration has tried so far."

"The Russian view is that their guy is winning," said the official, who has been involved in the talks in Washington, "and they may be right. So we're back to the question we faced a year ago: How do you change the balance and force the Syrians to negotiate?"

Mr. Kerry said on Monday that the United States and its allies were approaching a series of critical decisions on how to respond to the crisis. But even as he insisted that the administration remained committed to peacefully resolving a civil war that has claimed about 140,000 Syrian lives and displaced hundreds of thousands, it is no longer clear if the United States has the influence to broker a settlement or whether the limited steps the White House is now willing to consider would be sufficient to help it regain its lost leverage.

Debate has raged since the start of the civil war over whether Western and Arab nations should provide Syria's rebels with manpads. Administration officials have in the past sought to limit the flow of the weapons into the Syria conflict, fearing they could be smuggled away and later used by terrorists against civilian airliners. However, providing selected rebel

fighters with surface-to-air missiles is a logical response to the persistent barrel-bomb attacks of Syrian cities like Aleppo and Homs.

### The Syrian Opposition, Explained

There are believed to be hundreds, if not thousands, of groups fighting in Syria. These opposition groups are fighting the Assad regime, but recently turned on each other with increased ferocity.

Jeffrey White, a fellow at the [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#) and a former senior American intelligence official, said the Assad government was using Russian-supplied Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters to carry out the barrel-bomb attack in Homs. Russia, he said, is most likely providing spare parts such as engines, transmissions and rotors, which may explain Mr. Kerry's specific reference to how Russian weapons are fueling the war. A fighter from the Damascus suburbs who fled to Beirut, Lebanon, said one of the reasons he left was that the Army of Islam, the rebel group led by Zahran Alloush, had surface-to-air missiles, which he said were a Syrian Army model taken from anti-aircraft bases a year ago. But the Army of Islam, which is supported by Saudi private donors, has declined to share its plentiful arms and its cash with other rebel groups, particularly non-Islamist ones. That has complicated efforts to counter Mr. Assad's forces around Damascus.

Mr. Obama's apparent willingness to drop objections to supplying the rebel groups with heavier weapons may simply be an acknowledgment that Saudi Arabia and gulf states that are frustrated with American policy are now prepared to do so anyway, without Washington's blessing. American officials say they also now have a better sense than they did last year about which groups they can trust to use and secure the weapons.

Mr. Obama has also been influenced by growing fears that Syria is becoming a training ground for a new generation of terrorists and may become even more of a haven until a political settlement is reached.

"That's one big change from a year ago," a senior American diplomat said. "And it's beginning to haunt everyone with memories of Afghanistan."

The Wall Street Journal first reported the likely increase in manpad shipments and rebel salaries on its website Friday night.

Mr. Kerry alluded on Monday to the internal administration deliberations about what to do next on Syria on Monday before he conferred here with

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates.

“It is important for the world to consider in these next days exactly what steps can now be taken in the face of this intransigence that is creating an even greater human catastrophe by the moment,” Mr. Kerry said at his news conference in Jakarta.

In an administration that has been deeply divided on Syria strategy — the first hints of antigovernment protest erupted in the Damascus markets exactly three years ago Monday — Mr. Kerry has been among those arguing for more overt and covert pressure on Mr. Assad, according to administration officials.

But Mr. Obama has been wary of deep involvement and is adamant that no American forces can be put at risk — a reflection, aides say, of his belief that even if Mr. Assad is overthrown, the country could enter into a civil war from which there is no exit for years.

Mr. Kerry’s remarks on Monday reflected the blunt assessment that Mr. Assad is filibustering in Geneva while seeking a battlefield victory. “The regime stonewalled; they did nothing, except continue to drop barrel bombs on their own people and continue to destroy their own country,” he said. “And I regret to say they are doing so with increased support from Iran, from Hezbollah and from Russia.”

[Article 6.](#)

The National Interest

## **Erdogan at a Crossroads**

[Omer Zarpli](#)

February 18, 2014 -- Rocked by the corruption scandal that erupted a month and half ago, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is seeking resolution. He believes that will be found in winning elections, most immediately and importantly the country’s local elections at the end of March. He believes victory will absolve him from charges of corruption and the many other challenges he faces, and permit him to continue to rule Turkey, from whatever position he ultimately decides to occupy. He will pull out all the stops to ensure victory.

This means taking over the judiciary and preventing corruption investigations, further intimidating the declining opposition media, and denying unfettered access to the internet. He travels incessantly to change the subject from corruption, rallies Turks in the diaspora, intimidates business moguls, and wages relentless war against the Gulen Empire—his erstwhile ally, now accused of being behind the investigation and forming a ‘state within a state.’ This is his menu for the next six weeks. Failure is not an option.

#### Erdogan recovers

The graft scandal engulfing his government and family shook the prime minister to the core, but he managed to come back. Initially, he grudgingly yielded and sacrificed his ministers accused of corruption and bribery. But he quickly turned upon all he saw as his opponents. He disrupted the investigations by reshuffling thousands of police and hundreds of prosecutors and judges, strengthened his grip over the judiciary with new judicial changes, and now further tightens the screws on the media and internet.

As he consolidates his grip, he benefits enormously from the quiet of the West. Turkey’s western allies, particularly the United States, are treading carefully not to antagonize the prime minister while he incessantly blames foreign forces. Washington largely contented itself with the Turkish leader’s stopping his assaults against the American ambassador, and publicly assured the Turkish government that they will not get involved in Turkey’s internal matters. The European Union has made more noise and may have nudged the government to pull back on some planned judicial changes, but so far has not seriously raised the specter of suspending the membership talks, or adopted any serious action. Erdogan managed to portray his recent trip to Brussels as a great success story.

The ongoing but stagnant peace process with the insurgent Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) also provides him an important lifeline. The PKK remains quiet, keeps the ceasefire reached a year ago, and its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan throws his full support behind the Prime Minister. Without the Kurdish peace, the effects of the current scandal could have been much more destructive.

#### Uncertainties

Yet however likely victory at the polls may be, Erdogan has been hurt. He has also revived the opposition, who are likely to increase their vote tallies with the support of the Gulenists. Erdogan will get lower numbers, but beyond that it is hard to predict, particularly the all-important cities of Istanbul and Ankara, the bastions of his power. The wild card is the declining economy.

Deepening political instability, high-reaching corruption, Erdogan's incessant attacks against the nebulous "interest-rate lobby," and growing concerns about the rule of law, combined with tighter global liquidity conditions, is contributing to Turkey's already declining economy. Since the corruption scandal erupted, the Turkish lira tumbled to historic lows losing about 15 percent of its value against the US dollar—one of the worst-performing emerging-market currencies—economic growth is expected to slow, while inflation continues to rise. Central Bank's recent decision to sharply raise the interest rates to stem capital outflows, ease inflation, and stabilize the currency may not be enough to put the economy back on track. Continuing political tensions and lingering questions regarding Central Bank's independence will likely keep chipping away at Turkey's economic vitality.

Erdogan still has another important decision to make; whether to run for the presidency or carry on as prime minister. This will largely depend on the results of local elections. At the moment, staying at the helm of the executive branch seems safer and more likely for him. Leaving the government for the presidential palace never worked for those before him. Becoming president might force him to give up significant power, and it would bring up difficult issues regarding succession and his continued control over government decision-making, especially if he is replaced by President Gul who wields strong influence within the party. But staying as prime minister could come with its own price tag. He would have to change his party's regulations which bar him from running at the parliamentary elections for the fourth time. Too many times he pledged to abide by this rule that he put in place himself.

Meanwhile, Erdogan's reputation is likely to suffer further if Gulenists, who presumably have more ammunition against the government, gear up their attacks. While he has been able to absorb the destructive effects of the scandal so far, many argue that Gulenists have shown restraint and what

has been revealed so far regarding government's involvement in graft is only the tip of the iceberg. If more damaging revelations come out on the eve of the elections, this could seriously alter the balance against the Prime Minister. Most importantly, the opposition parties for the first time are showing some real vigor.

The way forward

Turkey is going through a messy divorce. Former allies who together ousted secular/military establishment and ruled the country for years are now trying to destroy each other. The results of this battle will also shape Turkey's future.

Prime Minister Erdogan, who looked increasingly vulnerable when the crisis first broke out in December, has managed to recover with a high-handed response. Success in local elections could further boost his position, and bring a degree of stability to the economy that has suffered enormously from the ongoing political uncertainties. But it is still too early for him to pop the champagne, especially if he continues on the same path. While Erdogan's repressive tactics have largely worked so far, his problems will not easily go away. He will not likely be able to finish off the Gulen Empire, or undo the damage done by the mounting leaks regarding government corruption or censorship over the media. Turkey's political and economic stability will continue to be affected by the declining rule of law, intimidation of media and business tycoons, muzzling of dissent, deepening polarization and weakening checks and balances.

Erdogan is a cunning politician. He earned his political spurs when he faced down massive antigovernment street protests last summer. But unlike the Gezi events, Erdogan is not fighting against disunited secular youth, but a highly organized and powerful Islamic movement, and somewhat revived opposition parties. Unless he wins big in the upcoming elections, maintaining his dominance will not be easy.

*Omer Zarpli is a research associate at The Century Foundation.*

[Article 7.](#)

Hürriyet Daily News

# As Erdoğan's chances for presidency

## diminish

Murat Yetkin

18 February 2014 -- There are two reasons why people who are concerned over Turkey are eager to see what President Abdullah Gül will do regarding disputed bills, such as the one about Internet limitations or about political control over the judiciary.

The first reason is about freedom of expression and judicial independence in Turkey.

The second reason is about the quality of democracy in Turkey, too, but in a different way. It is about who will be the next president of Turkey.

For the time being, there are only two candidates to the two-term elections to be completed by Aug. 27, 2014, in roughly six months' time: Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan or incumbent President Gül for a second term. In this first presidential election through popular vote, a candidate has to get at least 50 percent plus one vote to be the next, 12th president of Turkey.

It was already pretty clear that Erdoğan would like to ascend to the Presidential Palace on top of Çankaya Hill in [Ankara](#) when he got 50 percent of the votes in the June 2011 general elections.

Actually, he was not happy with the powers and authority of the Turkish president, he wanted more. At one point he criticized the U.S. system for giving too little initiative to the presidency. He also made it clear that he saw the separation of executive, legislative and judiciary powers as a stumbling block to executive power. Erdoğan also promoted the idea of the president keeping the party leadership position even after being elected, hinting that he did not want to leave the chair of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) to a successor, even if that successor is his long time fellow Gül.

He was hinting at a referendum for the kind of system that could lead Turkey into a sort of party-state ruled by one leader.

But times were different then. The [Arab Spring](#) was still at full speed, the Muslim Brotherhood was on the rise everywhere, the Turkish economy was not yet affected by U.S. Federal Reserve decisions, and Erdoğan's

authority did not seem vulnerable at all.

Erdoğan's hardline stance against the Gezi protests changed everything. He started to lose urban liberal support, which meant a lot during the reforms of the first few AK Parti years. However, he managed to consolidate his power with the grassroots with a "If I go, you'll suffer" kind of "boogeyman" rhetoric.

Things started to get worse after Erdoğan's confrontation with his longtime ally Fethullah Gülen, a U.S.-resident moderate Islamist scholar, following the start of the Dec. 17, 2013 graft probe. Erdoğan saw Gülenist prosecutors, judges and policemen behind it.

But Gülenists have a certain influence over the AK Parti grassroots, since their sympathizers had knocked on doors across the country over the last few elections on behalf of Erdoğan. The prime minister is worried that they will do the opposite for the March 30 local elections.

Of course, the presidential polls are more important than the locals. But the locals will be indicative of Erdoğan's power.

AK Parti spokesmen have already started to say that if they get less than 40 percent in the locals, they might change their presidency scenario. But that actually is a preemptive move in order to be able to present a 40-45 percent result, if they can get it, as a major victory for Erdoğan.

Such high support might again carry Erdoğan to the prime ministry in the next elections – perhaps in early elections this year - but it would fall short for the presidency. Erdoğan would have to change the "maximum of three consecutive terms in Parliament" rule in the AK Parti and focus on keeping the government.

But he may not give up so easily. According to whispers in the political corridors of Ankara, he might try to go to a referendum to change to a presidential system, relying on Kurdish votes based on the dialogue with the outlawed [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK) for a political solution to the Kurdish issue. But that has the risk of causing further annoyance within the AK Parti.

That could risk not only his presidency, but also Gül's second term. Gül's chances are already not helped with the disputed bills that have been sent for approval one after another by Erdoğan.

# **The Opening of the American Foreign-Policy Mind**

[Robert W. Merry](#)

February 18, 2014 -- The post-9/11 era in American foreign affairs is dying, and an opportunity thus is emerging for the United States to generate some fresh thinking about war and peace, when to go to war, when to opt for diplomacy, what the country's geopolitical imperatives are and how best to serve its national interests. Two recent political developments signified this deflection point, and more are on the way. One was the emergence in the Senate of a bipartisan resolution demanding a congressional debate and vote on the next phase in the country's Afghanistan policy. The Obama administration wants to keep ten thousand U.S. troops in that country for the next decade or more. The resolution, sponsored by Democrats Jeff Merkley and Joe Manchin and Republicans Mike Lee and Rand Paul, argues that such a commitment is a bridge too far when it comes to presidential prerogative. In their view, Congress must be in on the decision.

The same senators sought to attach a similar amendment to last year's defense-authorization bill, but it died through parliamentary actions by majority leader Harry Reid. It did gain a dozen cosponsors, however, and the House demonstrated its support with a 305-121 vote in favor of language much like the Senate language, though it ultimately was stripped from the final defense authorization.

The other development was the drubbing sustained by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee when it sought to destroy President Obama's participation in possibly seminal negotiations between Iran and six major powers over Iran's nuclear weapons policy. The potent Israel lobby tried to push through Congressional legislation that would impose heightened economic sanctions against Iran even as the administration argued this would upend the highly delicate talks and seriously increase the chance that America would have to resort to military means to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

In the past, AIPAC generally got what it wanted from Congress, and that appeared to be the case this time around, as well. Fully fifty senators signed on before President Obama sent word that he would veto the measure, given the country's growing aversion to more Middle Eastern wars; AIPAC quickly backed down. It seems reasonable that the lobby's executives considered a timely retreat far preferable to a full blown defeat at the hands of the president of the United States on an issue framed as one of war and peace.

The Daily Beast ran a piece entitled "How AIPAC Botched Its Biggest Fight in Years," and analysts quickly piled on. Ron Kampeas, Washington bureau chief for the Jewish Telegraph Agency, reported that AIPAC had been so disoriented by the fiasco that it still hadn't established its legislative agenda just three weeks before its big annual conference in Washington. The Washington Post's Jennifer Rubin, a fervent neocon commentator, wrote that AIPAC "is going through its rockiest period in decades," although characteristically she blamed Obama more than AIPAC leaders for these difficulties.

The real lesson, though, is that, in today's America, matters of war and peace have undergone a political transformation. The country wants peace and, based on events of the last decade, has erected a higher barrier of justification for its acceptance of more military action around the world based on wispy expressions of America's need to protect itself from international bad guys.

The Senate resolution on Afghanistan is a further reflection. A recent CNN poll indicated opposition to further American involvement in Afghan hostilities is at 82 percent, making it, as The Nation puts it, "arguably the least popular war in US history." And Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia told the magazine, "If the people of the...states of this great country speak to their representatives, I think all the representatives are going to find out this is one thing that unites us all." He added the people just can't figure out why, after twelve years in Afghanistan, the U.S. military has to remain another decade, particularly given that there is no clear stated goal for the military's continued role there, and that the Afghan terror threat has long since been dealt with.

These developments would have seemed impossible just a few years ago, as America still stirring visions of American beneficence assuaging the

hurts and wants of humanity around the world. Fewer and fewer Americans believe that stuff now, and the lessons of America's post Cold War foreign policy are increasingly clear: Iraq, a failure; Afghanistan, a quagmire with little apparent purpose; the Middle East generally, a region of turmoil struggling to define itself and largely impervious to Western meddling, cajolery or power; America, drastically in need of internal soothing and remediation.

In this new political climate, the country actually could begin the process of crafting a new set of ideas and concepts that could form the basis for a new foreign policy. It would begin with a rigorous analysis of the country's true interests around the world and then turn to questions of how to address those concerns and how to withdraw from regions and squabbles that don't affect vital U.S. interests. Serious foreign-policy questions could get attention, such as:

Why should we unnecessarily alienate Russia, and send it into alliance with a rising China, when it could serve as a significant counterweight to China?

Why should we care who runs the government of Ukraine?

Why would we want to be involved in the hornet's nest that is the Middle East these days?

What would be the most deft, sophisticated and effective way for us to respond to China's growing assertiveness in East Asia?

What kinds of creative new alliances, entered into honestly and maintained in good faith, could bolster America's aim of remaining the world's preeminent power?

What should be America's commitment to Europe as the cradle of Western civilization, and how should any such commitment be pursued?

Such questions weren't been pursued with much imagination or force as the country struggled with two wars and subordinated so much foreign-policy thinking to the so called War on Terror. But things are changing. The American people are withdrawing their delegation of authority on foreign policy. And an opportunity remains a big question.

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