

From: Office of Terje Rod-Larsen <[REDACTED]>
Subject: November 15 update
Date: Fri, 15 Nov 2013 16:33:22 +0000

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[Article 1.](#)

The National Interest

Has Iran Outfoxed Netanyahu?

[Rajan Menon](#)

November 15, 2013 -- The much-anticipated breakthrough in the negotiations aimed at preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons has yet to materialize. But Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who believes that a wily Iran is outwitting its gullible interlocutors, isn't

breathing any easier; instead, he's breathing fire. The statements from those involved in the talks (Iran and the P5+1) indicating that the obstacles to an interim accord are being overcome have incensed Netanyahu. And he has made his displeasure known—[publicly and without pulling punches](#)—even though the first-step agreement with Iran couldn't be reached in the end. As the upbeat reports streamed in last week, Netanyahu declared that a compromise with Iran would be a betrayal of Israel as well as a strategic blunder that would eventually bring grief to other states as well. He continues to insist that Israel will neither be bound by any deal, short of one that ensures denuclearization, that the P5+1 reaches with Iran nor rule out any response (read: a military strike) it deems necessary to defend its interests.

What are those Israeli interests? While Iranian leadership remains adamant about retaining an independent nuclear fuel cycle, which it regards as its right under the terms of the NPT, Israel has made it just as plain that Iran's acquisition of that capability is unacceptable—period. That's because the Israeli leadership is convinced that any accord that permits Iran to enrich uranium to a level needed for generating electricity, even under strict verification, enables it to gain, and pretty quickly, the capacity to dash across the nuclear threshold when it wishes to do so.

While this perspective explains Netanyahu's scorn for the negotiations, he risks becoming isolated should the dealmakers eventually start viewing him as an obstreperous maximalist who is heedless of the risk of war. Moreover, he doesn't have sure-fire options for dismantling Iran nuclear complex, which consists of [many facilities](#), widely dispersed and well protected. The most critical one, nestled deep underground within a mountain, is the Fordow site, and its -three thousand-plus centrifuges have enabled Iran to spin out enriched uranium from uranium hexafluoride gas (UF₆) to a level of 19.75 percent. Four other installations are crucial if Iran is to build a nuclear weapon: i) the Esfahan uranium conversion plant, where yellow cake is turned into uranium oxide and uranium hexafluoride; ii) the Natanz centrifuge complex; iii) the IR-40 heavy water reactor at Arak, which, though yet to be fueled, offers a plutonium pathway to nuclear arms; iv) the weapons design, manufacture, and testing center at [Parchin](#), where work on warheads may have been underway already.

The operational problems Israel faces in destroying these and other sites simultaneously are formidable and have been widely discussed by specialists. Among the key questions are whether Israel has: i) enough air- and missile-delivered ordnance packing enough earth-penetrating power to get the job done; ii) the number of fighter-bombers required to reach the targets, destroy (rather than damage) them, and return intact; iii) viable plans to cope with the possibility that its strike aircraft may have to take circuitous routes to maximize safety, thereby reducing their range. Even those experts who offer [relatively optimistic assessments](#) about Israel's capabilities concede that a militarily complex and politically controversial campaign involving a full-blown, and unprovoked, attack on Iran will at best lengthen the time Tehran needs to build the bomb, rather than making it impossible for it to do so.

So Netanyahu's first problem is that his assertions that Israel will do whatever is required to prevent an Iranian fuel cycle isn't credible to those calling the shots in Tehran. Besides, that's not their main worry; it's the threat of an American attack (Washington does have the planes, missiles, and bunker-busting bombs with the necessary power, in particular the 30,000 pound [Massive Ordnance Penetrator](#)) and the effect that the wide-ranging, hard-hitting economic sanctions are having on the Iranian economy—and might have on the weary Iranians, who've seen the value of the rial plunge and inflation soar. Iran's leaders have squashed several protests since 1979, most recently in 2011, but they aren't eager to face more, no doubt realizing that every regime's luck runs out at some point. Now that the negotiations have aroused expectations, Iran may be confident, no matter what President Obama has said about all options being open, that the United States won't torpedo the talks so long as they appear to possess momentum and promise. And Tehran is evidently doing what's needed to ensure that the diplomats on the other side of the bargaining table remain hopeful.

In short, Iran's decision, following Hassan Rouhani's election as president, to agree to negotiate without preconditions has put Netanyahu in a bad place. That Tehran took the decision because the sanctions had begun to bite hasn't, oddly enough, seemed to vindicate the Israeli prime minister's hang-tough stance. Moreover, Tehran's change of course has increased the already abundant mistrust that Netanyahu harbors toward President

Obama. The chemistry between them, never good, has been made worse by the positive comments emanating from the administration about the negotiations; and that will work to Tehran's advantage.

Netanyahu has additional problems. The first is that Tehran won't engage in a precipitous "breakout" given the risk that President Obama would then be compelled to resort to force. The second is that the sanctions haven't forced Iran to abandon its insistence on having a fuel cycle, and there's no evidence that they will. Even were Rouhani inclined to make such a concession in order to gain relief for the sagging Iranian economy—and there's no evidence that that's the case—he would never be able to sell such a deal to the hardliners at home. Nor would he get cover from the Supreme Leader, which means that he would be committing political suicide. The Iranian negotiators face their own domestic constraints, which is why Rouhani and his Foreign Minister and lead negotiator, Mohammad Javad Zarif, have never wavered from their position, one reiterated frequently and publicly, that Iran [will never forgo enrichment altogether](#). Even if a deal allows some enrichment, Iranian negotiators will have to win support at home before agreeing to the details concerning curbs on such third-rail issues as the disposition of the uranium that exceeds the agreed-upon enrichment ceiling and curbs on the Arak reactor.

The real question, then, is what kind of a deal is likely flow from the negotiations, even as an initial installment. The best that can be hoped for realistically is that Iran will agree to freeze further enrichment, to accept a ceiling on the degree of enrichment, to not fuel the Arak reactor, and to permit additional verification safeguards at its main installations, all in exchange for such sanctions relief as Obama can provide without first obtaining Congressional consent. The Iranians will doubtless insist that the rest of the P5+1 also ease up on sanctions, something Russia and China will be most inclined to do. Tehran's bet is that even a minimal lifting of sanctions will, eventually, prompt other countries to reduce their economic pressure and that, in time, some will peel off from the sanctions system altogether, providing that the talks continue and hope endures. Once individual states start easing their penalties, it will be hard to reestablish a severe and comprehensive regime. Or so Iran may be calculating.

When it comes to stopping the Iranian nuclear program, Israel faces more than operational problems; there are political ones as well. An Israeli

military strike on Iran, or any other response that involves force against Iran's nuclear program, will be welcomed by the Sunni regimes in the Arab world, particularly in the Persian Gulf; but no Arab leader will applaud it publicly for fear that the "street," and not just in the Arab segment of the Muslim world, will have an entirely different reaction. The Sunni-Shia divide is exaggerated, certainly when it comes to assaying Muslims' reaction to an Israeli attack on Iran, and the outrage and protests in the Muslim world, and not just there, will exacerbate Israel's isolation. The reaction within Iran itself will range between rally-around-the flag outrage, which the Iranian government will stoke and publicize, and getting on with the quotidian travails of making a living under hard economic conditions. Dissidents who use the attack as an opportunity to mobilize opposition to the regime will look like quislings and be quashed quickly, not least because they will be few in number.

The only deal that's feasible given all of this appears to be one that allows Iran a fuel cycle but limits the amount of enrichment and the level of it (to 3.5 percent) and that, in addition, imposes even tighter verification mechanisms, including those provided for by NPT's Additional Protocol. Iran signed the Protocol in December 2003 but has not permitted its provisions to be implemented. Tehran has, however, indicated that it might be [willing to do so](#) under a quid pro quo. Negotiations aimed at gaining additional concessions from Iran—on such matters as the removing the uranium enriched above 3.5 percent—will doubtless continue, but hopes for denuclearization will go unrequited, even though Tehran will keep the process alive.

This accounts for Netanyahu's combative mood. He found it easy to muster international support for a hard-line against Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was losing political ground at home and whose inflammatory rhetoric made him a reviled figure in much of the West. Rouhani, a smooth operator, has changed the game.

But if the Iranians appear to have outmaneuvered Netanyahu of late, their apparent confidence that he cannot exercise the military option under the current circumstances may be misplaced. The Prime Minister has domestic constraints of his own, having drawn a big red line and staked his reputation, which he much prizes, as a leader who can be counted on not to

flinch when hard decisions are required to defend Israel—something he believes that only he can reliably do.

There is, in short, a game of chicken afoot between Israel and Iran. What's not yet clear is which player, if either, will be the first to swerve.

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[Article 2.](#)

NYT

French Muscle, American Cheese

[Roger Cohen](#)

November 14, 2013 -- French-American relations, often a study in how close love can be to hatred, have taken an interesting turn of late. The cheese-eating surrender monkeys of France, in the phrase from “The Simpsons,” have become the world’s meat-chomping enforcement tigers. As for the United States, it has, in the French view, gone a touch camembert-soft.

The administration of President François Hollande is not known for its decisiveness on the domestic front. Vacillation accompanies economic drift. But, perhaps in compensation, it has shown a resolute streak in international affairs. From Mali to Syria and now Iran, French firmness has been the rule. Paris finds itself to the right of Washington.

This has led to differences. There is talk of the trauma of Aug. 31. On that Saturday afternoon President Hollande took a call from President Obama. A ramped-up France was in a state of readiness for the expected joint military response the next morning to the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons. Until Obama let drop his now notorious “non” after he had opted during a walk in the garden for a different course.

France felt ill-used, having stretched to support its ally as Britain faltered, only to find itself dangling in foolish-looking vassal mode. Now, some 10 weeks later, Syria has revealed its chemical weapons arsenal and

committed to giving it up. But, in the French view, the last-minute deal has also legitimized President Bashar al-Assad, put a nail in the coffin of the nonradical Syrian opposition and so set back any conceivable resolution of a devastating conflict. The French view is persuasive.

Then along came the Iran nuclear dossier, a subject on which successive French presidents — from Jacques Chirac through Nicolas Sarkozy to Hollande — have had a consistent view: The Islamic Republic wants a bomb; only a tough approach will stop it. Once again the French had the feeling of being presented by the Obama administration with a wobbly *fait accompli*.

For weeks before the Geneva meeting at which hopes for an accord first soared and then sank, the United States and Iran had opened a quiet two-way negotiation on a six-month interim deal. Officials close to Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister, told me these bilateral discussions had produced an agreed U.S-Iranian text (with caveats) by the time the Geneva talks opened. When the French saw it they were troubled.

Their concerns focused on three areas: The heavy-water plant at Arak that the Iranians are building, where the outline agreement seemed to allow continued construction; language that appeared to concede prematurely an Iranian “right to enrich” or something close to it; and what measures exactly Iran would take to dispose of its stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium. Much of the Geneva meeting focused on the French determination to close these loopholes — only for the changes to prove unacceptable to Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, and his team.

The next few weeks will tell whether France improved the deal or threw it off the rails and lost it. The conviction in Paris is that the accord is still doable. “We did not feel it was smart to rush and we did not feel the original text was balanced,” one official said. “Six months in Arak is a long time. Plutonium is a different issue.”

The overall feeling in France observing U.S. actions in the Middle East is of a troubling uncertainty, a retreat that tends to leave a vacuum, a new American determination to work with a “light footprint” that can give the impression of disinterest.

In a speech this week to mark the 40th anniversary of the formation of the French Policy Planning Staff, Fabius dwelt on this perceived trend. “The

United States seems no longer to wish to become absorbed by crises that do not align with its new vision of its national interest,” he said, suggesting that this explained “the non-response by strikes to the use of chemical weapons by the Damascus regime, whatever the red lines set a year earlier.”

He went on to say this U.S. redirection seemed likely to be “durable,” reflecting the “heavy trauma of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan” and the current “rather isolationist tendency” in American public opinion. Because nobody can take the place of the United States, this disengagement could create “major crises left to themselves,” Fabius said, and “a strategic void could be created in the Middle East,” with widespread perception of “Western indecision” in a world less multipolar than “zero-polar.”

The United States, of course, is not quitting the Middle East and isolationist tendencies are easily overstated — as Fabius later conceded. But his warnings are worth heeding. Obama spoke to Hollande this week; he expressed how “the United States deeply values its relationship with France.” The president could usefully borrow some French toughness to get a winning Iran deal.

When the cheese-eaters are in the White House it is time to worry.

[Article 3.](#)

The Financial Times

The four big truths that are shaping the Iran talks

Philip Stephens

November 14, 2013 -- The who-said-what game about last weekend’s talks in Geneva has become a distraction. The six-power [negotiations with Tehran](#) to curb Iran’s nuclear programme may yet succeed or fail. But wrangling between the US and France on the terms of an acceptable deal should not allow the trees to obscure the forest. The organising facts shaping the negotiations have not changed.

The first of these is that Tehran’s acquisition of a bomb would be more than dangerous for the Middle East and for wider international security. It

would most likely set off a nuclear arms race that would see Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt signing up to the nuclear club. The nuclear non-proliferation treaty would be shattered. A future regional conflict could draw Israel into launching a pre-emptive nuclear strike. This is not a region obviously susceptible to cold war disciplines of deterrence.

The second ineluctable reality is that Iran has mastered the nuclear cycle. How far it is from building a bomb remains a subject of debate. Different intelligence agencies give different answers. These depend in part on what the spooks actually know and in part on what their political masters want others to hear. The progress of an Iranian warhead programme is one of the known unknowns that have often wreaked havoc in this part of the world. Israel points to an imminent threat. European agencies are more relaxed, suggesting Tehran is still two years or so away from a weapon. Western diplomats broadly agree that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has not taken a definitive decision to step over the line. What Iran has been seeking is what diplomats call a breakout capability – the capacity to dash to a bomb before the international community could effectively mobilise against it.

The third fact – and this one is hard for many to swallow – is that neither a negotiated settlement nor the air strikes long favoured by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, can offer the rest of the world a watertight insurance policy.

It should be possible to construct [a deal](#) that acts as a plausible restraint – and extends the timeframe for any breakout – but no amount of restrictions or intrusive monitoring can offer a certain guarantee against Tehran's future intentions.

By the same token, bombing Iran's nuclear sites could certainly delay the programme, perhaps for a couple of years. But, assuming that even the hawkish Mr Netanyahu is not proposing permanent war against Iran, air strikes would not end it.

You cannot bomb knowledge and technical expertise. To try would be to empower those in Tehran who say the regime will be safe only when, like North Korea, it has a weapon. So when Barack Obama says the US will never allow Iran to get the bomb he is indulging in, albeit understandable, wishful thinking.

The best the international community can hope for is that, in return for a relaxation of sanctions, Iran will make a judgment that it is better off

sticking with a threshold capability. To put this another way, if Tehran does step back from the nuclear brink it will be because of its own calculation of the balance of advantage.

The fourth element in this dynamic is that Iran now has a leadership that, faced with the severe and growing pain inflicted by sanctions, is prepared to talk. There is nothing to say that Hassan Rouhani, the president, is any less hard-headed than previous Iranian leaders, but he does seem ready to weigh the options.

Seen from this vantage point – and in spite of the inconclusive outcome – Geneva can be counted a modest success. Iran and the US broke the habit of more than 30 years and sat down to talk to each other. Know your enemy is a first rule of diplomacy – and of intelligence. John Kerry has his detractors but, unlike his predecessor Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state understands that serious diplomacy demands a willingness to take risks.

The Geneva talks illuminated the shape of an interim agreement. Iran will not surrender the right it asserts to uranium enrichment, but will lower the level of enrichment from 20 per cent to 3 or 4 per cent. It will suspend work on its heavy water reactor in Arak – a potential source of plutonium – negotiate about the disposal of some of its existing stocks of enriched uranium, and accept intrusive international inspections. A debate between the six powers about the strength and credibility of such pledges is inevitable, as is an argument with Tehran about the speed and scope of a run down of sanctions.

If there is an agreement when talks resume later this month, it will not satisfy hardliners on either side. The challenges to Mr Obama from those in Washington who think the US should be ready to start another Middle East war will be mirrored by opposition from the more reactionary elements in Tehran to any concessions to the “Great Satan”. Sad to say, Mr Obama does not have a great record in winning arguments in Congress, while no one really knows the limits of Ayatollah Khamenei’s negotiating flexibility. So far Mr Netanyahu’s government, in tune with the Gulf states, has had nothing to say beyond denouncing any deal. The [message from Israel](#) and from Saudi Arabia, its ally on this, is that Iran must be kept in a permanent state of isolated enfeeblement, lest it re-emerge as the region’s most

powerful actor. They point to Tehran's support for Hizbollah and for the murderous Assad regime in Syria.

The interests of almost everyone else are otherwise. Not to be tricked by smooth talking into making it easier for Iran to acquire the bomb, but to open a well-policed pathway that would allow it eventually to rejoin the community of nations. There is no guarantee this strategy will work even if an interim accord is reached during the second round of talks, but, to paraphrase a famous British statesman, it is better than all the alternatives.

[Article 4.](#)

Reuters

As powers push for talks, Syria balance tilts towards Assad

[Samia Nakhoul](#)

November 14, 2013 -- Beirut - More than two and a half years into the civil war devastating Syria, the United States and Russia are pushing the combatants to the negotiating table in Geneva, but on terms that mark a shift in favour of Bashar al-Assad against the increasingly fragmented rebels seeking to oust him.

Since the August 21 nerve gas attacks on rebel suburbs ringing Damascus, which brought the U.S. to the brink of a missile assault on Assad's forces, the diplomatic tide has turned against the opposition, which briefly believed external intervention would enable its forces to launch a final offensive.

Instead, the combination of hesitation by President Barack Obama's administration and an 11th hour deal brokered by Russia, a key Assad ally, to decommission Syria's chemical arsenal, has wrong-footed the rebels, now under intense U.S. and European pressure to attend talks in Geneva with a vague agenda.

Syrian opposition advisers and independent analysts fear this could channel the Syrian conflict - like other intractable regional problems such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - into a lengthy and fruitless process.

The only diplomatic landmark in this conflict, last June's ██████-brokered statement known as Geneva I, was vague enough.

It called for a transitional government in a way that many assumed precluded any role for the Assad family, which has ruled Syria with an iron fist since President Assad's late father, Hafez, seized absolute power in 1970.

There has been barely a flicker of agreement within Syria about its future since the country erupted in initially peaceful protests in March 2011. A source close to the internationally recognised political opposition, the National Coalition, says it fears the U.S.-Russia deal to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal has restored the Assad administration's legitimacy, even as it uses tactics such as the starvation of rebel areas to try to regain control.

TOPPLING ASSAD NOT A PRIORITY

Regional analysts and diplomats closely involved also agree that Western concerns have moved on from toppling Assad to how to stop jihadist groups linked to al Qaeda gaining further traction in a conflict where mainstream rebel groups with limited Western backing are losing ground. The U.S. position is that "the opposition must negotiate with the regime and agree on a roadmap", said Fawaz Gerges, Middle East expert at the London School of Economics.

"The Americans and the Europeans want to lock Assad into Geneva; it is a process without peace."

The opposition source, who did not want to be identified, said the West was switching "from an Arab Spring narrative to a counter-terrorism narrative" and bullying the opposition to attend Geneva II or lose its support.

For the West, Syria has now become "a source of terrorist recruits that will come back to Europe and America", he said. "But that doesn't answer the fundamental problem of how to stop it; that terrorism will get worse and the longer the war goes on, the more fragmented and radicalised the opposition becomes."

"The regime's military advances will continue. It is difficult to imagine that Assad's position will be weaker in six months. This is not a dead man walking," said Ayham Kamel, a Syria expert at the Eurasia consultancy group.

"Al Qaeda is here to stay. This is a new reality. It is hard to imagine how the threat will disappear in the future."

Even Saudi Arabia, the opposition's biggest supporter, is in two minds. Diplomats and officials in the kingdom say it regards the Syrian war as battle for regional power with Iran and its Arab Shi'ite Muslim allies such as Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese paramilitary movement that this summer threw its weight behind Assad.

The Saudis have been unusually strident and public in criticising the United Nations and the United States since the Syrian chemical weapons deal appeared to be leading to a rapprochement with Iran, despite the failure to reach a breakthrough on Tehran's nuclear programme in high-level talks in Geneva last weekend.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi spy chief, went as far as to declare a "major shift" away from Washington.

But diplomats in the Gulf say his cousin Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the influential interior minister, is much more concerned about al Qaeda, and the terrorist "blowback" implications of supporting the rebels, than the fate of Assad.

FUTILE EXERCISE

With friends like this in such policy ambiguity, the Syrian opposition may well wonder what its real options are.

"The international consensus in support of the opposition and militarisation of the conflict is no longer there," said Kamel of Eurasia. "There is no longer a belief that a military victory for the opposition is possible."

Diplomatic sources say there is a recognition by Russia and the West of Assad's ability to remain, even if Syria has already been carved up into enclaves - Sunni rebels in the north and east, secessionist Kurds in the northeast and Alawites and others in the capital and north-western coastal area.

According to these sources, U.S. and Russian officials have privately been discussing what organs of the Syrian state would remain and at what level - who would have to go and who would have to stay - indicating the possibility of compromise.

Yet critics say talks in Geneva are becoming a substitute for real policy, with no concerted plan to stop the war. Some analysts compare this to the 1992-95 Bosnia war, where meandering prolonged talks failed to stop fighting until NATO air strikes against Serb forces in the late summer of 1995.

Close watchers of Syria and the opposition, which has agreed in principle to attend the long-delayed talks, believe Geneva II will be futile because the West has no strategy to force a stop to a war which has so far cost 100,000 lives, displaced more than 4 million people and created 2.2 million refugees.

"Even if Geneva II takes place, don't expect an imminent solution. There might be more Genevas and the war will continue," Lebanese columnist Sarkis Naoum told Reuters.

"We had a war that went on for 15 years, envoys would meet but nothing would happen," Naoum said, referring to Lebanon's own 1975-1990 civil war.

Even if the parties agree in Geneva, analysts say, they would need to convince rebel armed groups on the ground, who have said nothing less than a commitment to end Assad's rule would persuade them to stop fighting.

"I don't see how Geneva II will be remotely successful if the regime is not prepared to make the slightest indication that they are ready for a transition. Assad is saying the opposite, he is giving interview after interview saying that he will not hand over power," one source close to the opposition said.

PROTRACTED WAR

Western nations hope Russia will follow up on the deal to rid Syria of chemical weapons by putting pressure on Assad. But with the deal in place and government forces making gains, there is little incentive for Russia to change its position.

If the Geneva talks go ahead and succeed, Russia will be able to cast itself as a peacemaker. If not, it will continue to blame rebels, the West and Gulf Arab states, saying that Assad's government was ready to attend without preconditions while the United States and others failed to get the rebels to do so.

Militarily, Assad's forces, backed by Iran and Hezbollah, are flushing out rebels from around Damascus and other areas.

Within rebel ranks, Sunni jihadists and other groups linked to al Qaeda have become the dominant current among the opposition while other, moderate, groups, backed by the West and armed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are in disarray.

And while international players deliberate about Geneva, the Syrian battleground continues to draw in foreign radical Shi'ite fighters - backing Assad's Alawite minority rule - and Sunnis seeking to topple Assad and install an Islamist caliphate.

"The U.S. is pursuing a very dangerous strategy which is to say they pursue talk almost for the sake of talks," the source close to the opposition said. "The only way this war will end is if the regime goes," the rebel source said.

"If there is not going to be military intervention against the regime then there needs to be a much more aggressive and deliberate approach to force the regime to step down through harsh pressure, and that means forcing Russia and Iran to make it happen."

Few believe that Geneva will alleviate the sufferings of Syrians in the near future.

"The logic in the U.S. is that the only way for the opposition to snatch a political victory out of the jaws of military defeat is through Geneva II," Gerges said. "The chances of Geneva II producing a breakthrough probably are less than 20 percent.

"It is a grim situation ... it is a prolonged war, a war of attrition, and in the meantime the humanitarian crisis will intensify and turn into a world tragedy of great proportion."

[Article 5.](#)

Foreign Policy

[Why Saudi Arabia Hates the Iran Deal](#)

[David Kenner](#)

November 14, 2013 -- Beirut - As President Barack Obama pursues a historic deal with Iran over its nuclear program, he has already made history -- though perhaps not in the way he intended. For the first time since the United States emerged as a major power in the Middle East, all of its key allies -- Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia -- are in open revolt against its policies.

With U.S. and Iranian negotiators preparing for another round of negotiations, Washington's relationship with Riyadh may prove the hardest to patch up. While Israeli officials [had signaled](#) that a previous version of a

nuclear deal was something they "didn't love but could live with," Saudi concerns about Iran relate to a whole range of actions that the kingdom views as a threat to their influence in the Arab world -- and even their grip on power at home. As a result, analysts and former U.S. officials say, Saudi Arabia sees any realistic deal as American acquiescence to Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East.

"[Saudi officials] don't think this leads to a deal that leads to peace, they think this leads to Iranian domination of the Gulf," said Jon Alterman, the director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "To their minds it doesn't do anything about Iranian ambitions, it just takes the United States out of the equation as a force that's helping box Iran in."

This is far from the first issue on which the Saudi royals have been at odds with the Obama administration. Top Saudi officials [were angered](#) by a previous U.S. decision to cancel a planned strike against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, as well as what they perceived as Washington's hostile attitude toward the governments in Egypt and Bahrain. In response to these disagreements, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an independent effort to train Syrian rebels - even [enlisting](#) Pakistani trainers in its effort - while intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan [announced](#) that the kingdom would undertake a "major shift" away from Washington.

It may just be that Saudi Arabia and the United States have increasingly irreconcilable priorities when it comes to the Middle East. While the Obama administration's focus is clearly on Iran's nuclear program, Saudi royals see potential threats in a range of other Iranian activities, such as its support for the Assad regime, its patronage of the Lebanese paramilitary organization Hezbollah, and what they perceive as its intent to use Shia communities to stoke unrest in the Arab Gulf.

"They want to stop [Iran], to stop its ability to project influence in the region. And I think they've drawn the line in Syria," said Bernard Haykel, a professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University. "Sometimes they say, 'if we don't do it in Syria, the next time it will be on our own territory.'"

The threat of Iran destabilizing the governments of the Arab Gulf may not be the top concern of anyone in Washington, but analysts say that it's an issue officials in Riyadh takes seriously. It was only two years ago, after all

that they spearheaded an intervention into Bahrain to put down what they viewed as a pro-Iranian uprising against the ruling Sunni regime.

"There is this idea that the Iranians are supporting fifth columns in the states of the region, which they will use to mount an unconventional attack," said Alterman. "That they have agents from within Shia communities and more broadly who [Saudi officials] believe will...carry out asymmetrical warfare against the Gulf states."

Chas Freeman -- a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia who was tapped for a top intelligence post in the Obama administration before a controversy about his views toward Israel caused him to withdraw his name -- believes that the Saudis' concerns go beyond the fear that Washington will no longer help contain Iran, but may actually align itself with Tehran again. "[There are] probably recollections of the time, more than 30 years ago, when Iran was the regional gendarme of the United States," he said. "That would mean a long-term strategic erosion in their relative position in the region."

The idea that U.S.-Iranian relations could return to what they were under the Shah's time may seem outlandish to officials in Washington. But the royals in Riyadh perhaps have a deeper institutional memory than their American counterparts. Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal took office four years before the Iranian Revolution, while the current King Abdullah was already head of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and second in line for the throne.

While the United States and Iran have so far worked to keep negotiations focused on the nuclear issue, it may be difficult to keep broader concerns about Tehran's role in the Middle East from leaking into the conversation. Alterman believes that a final agreement may have to address issues like Iran's support for the Assad regime and Hezbollah, without which it would be impossible to fully lift sanctions. "You could get to May, and have some very, very difficult political discussions in the U.S. and Iran," he said. Such a broadening of the issues on the table could give the Saudis a chance to make their voice heard -- but few expect them to change their tune. "When Kerry went to Saudi Arabia [earlier this month], they told him in no uncertain terms that they're against any deal being cut, any lifting of the sanctions," said Haykel. "They want Iran to be punished."

The Obama administration has little interest in world leadership

Victor Davis Hanson

November 14, 2013 -- The United States has ridden — and tamed — the wild global tiger since the end of World War II. The frantic ride has been dangerous, to us, but a boon to humanity. At the same time, America's leadership role has been misrepresented and misunderstood abroad and at home, including by some of our country's own leaders. Accordingly, our current president, Barack Obama, has decided to climb down from the tiger, with the certain consequence that it will run wild again. The crowning achievement of postwar American policy was the defeat of Soviet Communism. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, America aimed at a "new world order." There was to be no place, at least in theory, for renegade dictators like Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic. After 9/11, the U.S. declared a "war on terror" and led an international effort to stop Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and Islamist jihadists. Despite the occasional mishaps, setbacks, and errant strategies, U.S. leadership nonetheless ensured worldwide free commerce, travel, and communications. When it could, America promoted free-market economies and democracy in authoritarian states. Our key allies — the United Kingdom and its former commonwealth, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and Israel — were assured of our unwavering support and got rich. Neutrals and enemies alike assumed that it was as unwise to be on the wrong side of America as it was beneficial to be on friendly terms. The Obama administration apparently has tired of the global order that American power created. The president seems determined that America should become unexceptional, and his five-year-long efforts are now bearing fruit. The result is that no one knows where global violence will break out next, much less who will stop it. France, not the United States, pushes for a tougher front against radical Iran, Islamism, and WMD proliferation. Its socialist government is to the right of the United States. Germany is the more adult fiscal power, Japan the more realistic about Chinese aggression,

Israel and the Gulf states the more accurate in assessing Iranian nuclear ambitions, and Russia the more dependable problem-solver.

The superpower United States chose to be led in Libya by much weaker Britain and France. Syrian president Bashar Assad ignored serial American red lines. In response, Obama vowed to intervene before vowing not to — and finally outsourced influence to Vladimir Putin. That back step apparently fulfilled the president's preelection open-mic promise to Russia to be more flexible.

The prestige of the United Nations suffers terribly from the erratic nature of the supposedly pro-█████. Obama administration. We exceeded the resolutions of the █████. on Libya; we never even sought them in Syria; and we are now undermining them over Iran.

Turkey, under increasingly Islamist prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is closer to the Obama administration than is Israel, America's best friend in the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi came to power in Egypt on assurances of American support — before being removed by Egyptian generals for subverting the constitution. It is not clear to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, or even Australia and New Zealand that they are still firmly under the American defense umbrella. China often seems to remind — and warn — them of just that reality.

There are many reasons why America jumped off the tiger. After five years of near-record budget deficits, we are struggling with the highest level of national debt as a percentage of GDP since the immediate postwar period. That dismal fact is known to both allies and enemies who expect the U.S. military to limp homeward. Abroad too many states do not trust the word of an American president. Obama has misled over Benghazi, flipped and flopped over Syria and Egypt, and deceived the American people on the Affordable Care Act. When the American secretary of state has to assure the world that its proposed military action "will be unbelievably small" while the president is forced to explain that our military doesn't "do pinpricks," we appear hardly credible or formidable. Obama himself seems unable to fathom the fallout from the NSA's tapping of German chancellor Angela Merkel's cell phone or from allowing Vladimir Putin to adjudicate the Syrian mess. It is unclear whether Obama has even appreciated the traditional U.S. role of world leadership. Or perhaps he feels America lacks either the moral assurance or material resources to

continue to ride the global tiger. Obama rightly senses that Americans certainly seem tired after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are reaching oil and gas independence from the Middle East and don't see it as central to our security. After the Arab Spring, and the rise and fall of dictators, Islamists and generals, things still stay mostly the same and beyond remedy through more American blood and treasure. America does not seem to have any strong preferences for our old allies, free markets, or democracies. If Obama wanted to change America's role in the world, he instead has changed the world itself. Riding the tiger's back was always risky, but not as much as jumping off and allowing it to run wild. The world now wants someone to get back on — but is unsure about who, when, how, and at what cost.

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The Washington Post

Why liberals are panicked about Obamacare

[Charles Krauthammer](#)

“Even if it takes a change to the law, the president should honor the commitment the federal government made to those people and let them keep what they got.”

— Bill Clinton, Nov. 12

November 14, 2013 -- [So the former president asserts](#) that the current president [continues to dishonor](#) his “you like your plan, you can keep your plan” pledge. And calls for the Affordable Care Act to be changed, despite furious White House resistance to the very idea.

Coming from the dean of the Democratic Party, this one line marked the breaching of the dam. It legitimized the brewing [rebellion of panicked Democrats](#) against Obamacare. Within hours, that rebellion went loudly public. By Thursday, President Obama had been forced into a rear-guard

holding action, asking insurers to [grant a one-year extension](#) of current plans.

The damage to the Obama presidency, however, is already done. His approval rating has [fallen to 39 percent](#), his lowest ever. And, for the first time, a majority considers him untrustworthy. That bond is not easily repaired.

At stake, however, is more than the fate of one presidency or of the current Democratic majority in the Senate. At stake is the new, more ambitious, social-democratic brand of American liberalism introduced by Obama, of which Obamacare is both symbol and concrete embodiment.

Precisely when the GOP was returning to a more constitutionalist conservatism committed to reforming, restructuring and reining in the welfare state (see, for example, the Paul Ryan Medicare reform passed by House Republicans with [near-unanimity](#)), Obama offered a transformational liberalism designed to expand the role of government, enlarge the welfare state and create yet more new entitlements (see, for example, [his call for universal preschool](#) in his most recent State of the Union address).

The centerpiece of this vision is, of course, Obamacare, the most sweeping social reform in the past half-century, affecting one-sixth of the economy and directly touching the most vital area of life of every citizen.

As the only socially transformational legislation in modern American history to be enacted on a [straight party-line vote](#), Obamacare is wholly owned by the Democrats. Its unraveling would catastrophically undermine their underlying ideology of ever-expansive central government providing cradle-to-grave care for an ever-grateful citizenry.

For four years, this debate has been theoretical. Now it's real. And for Democrats, it's a disaster.

It begins with the bungled rollout. If Washington can't even do the Web site — the literal portal to this brave new world — how does it propose to regulate the vast ecosystem of American medicine?

Beyond the competence issue is the arrogance. Five million freely chosen, freely purchased, freely renewed health-care plans are summarily canceled. Why? Because they don't meet some arbitrary standard set by the experts in Washington.

For all his [news conference gyrations](#) about not deliberately deceiving people with his “if you like it” promise, the law Obama so triumphantly gave us allows you to keep your plan only if he likes it. This is life imitating comedy — that old line about a liberal being someone who doesn’t care what you do as long as it’s mandatory.

Lastly, deception. The essence of the entitlement state is government giving away free stuff. Hence Obamacare would provide insurance for 30 million uninsured, while giving everybody tons of free medical services — without adding “one dime to our deficits,” [promised Obama](#).

This being inherently impossible, there had to be a catch. Now we know it: hidden subsidies. Toss millions of the insured off their plans and onto the Obamacare “exchanges,” where they would be forced into more expensive insurance packed with coverage they don’t want and don’t need — so that the overcharge can be used to subsidize others.

The reaction to the incompetence, arrogance and deception has ranged from ridicule to anger. But more is in jeopardy than just panicked congressional Democrats. This is the signature legislative achievement of the Obama presidency, the embodiment of his new entitlement-state liberalism. If Obamacare goes down, there will be little left of its underlying ideology.

Perhaps it won’t go down. Perhaps the [Web portal hums beautifully](#) on Nov. 30. Perhaps they’ll find a way to restore the canceled policies without wrecking the financial underpinning of the exchanges.

Perhaps. The more likely scenario, however, is that Obamacare does fail. It either fails politically, renounced by a wide consensus that includes a growing number of Democrats, or it succumbs to the financial complications (the insurance “death spiral”) of the very amendments desperately tacked on to save it.

If it does fail, the effect will be historic. Obamacare will take down with it more than Mary Landrieu and Co. It will discredit Obama’s new liberalism for years to come.