

Obama renews military threat against Iran

Peter Symonds
17 September 2013

Even as he put plans for strikes on Syria temporarily on hold, US President Barack Obama on Sunday renewed his military threat against Iran and made clear that he regards the Iranian regime as the chief obstacle to US interests in the Middle East.

Speaking as the US-Russia deal to dismantle Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons was being finalised, Obama told ABC News: "I think what the Iranians understand is that the nuclear issue is a far larger issue for us than the chemical weapons issue, that the threat ... against Israel that a nuclear Iran poses is much closer to our core interests."

Just as Obama is prepared to go to war against Syria on the basis of lies about chemical weapons, so his administration has mounted an economic blockade against Iran on the basis of unsubstantiated claims that it is seeking nuclear weapons. Harsh economic sanctions over the past two years have been accompanied by a steady US military build-up in the Persian Gulf and repeated threats of war against Tehran.

Having backed off, for now, an attack on Syria, Obama warned that Iran "shouldn't draw a lesson that we haven't struck [Syria] to think that we won't strike Iran."

Obama's comments were, in part, designed to deflect criticism from the Israeli government that the US deal with Russia over Syria's chemical weapons had eased the pressure on Iran. Obama dispatched Secretary of State John Kerry to Israel to reassure Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US remained committed to the use of force against Iran.

After meeting with Kerry, Netanyahu declared: "Iran must understand the consequences of its continued defiance of the international community by its pursuit toward nuclear weapons." He insisted that any diplomatic moves toward Iran had to be "coupled with a credible military threat."

In an *interview* with *Times* Israeli intelligence minister Yuval Steinitz explicitly criticised the Obama administration for failing to make "credible enough" its threat of force against Iran. "It should be like Syria: 'We are going to attack you unless you give up your nuclear weapons program,'" he said, adding that US measures had to be "more credible and more concrete, with some timetable, some time limits."

Steinitz was also critical of US efforts to open a dialogue with Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, who won the June election. Rouhani has indicated a willingness to open negotiations over the country's nuclear program. Echoing previous remarks by Netanyahu, Steinitz declared that Rouhani was fooling the world with his "smiling campaign."

During Sunday's ABC News interview, Obama confirmed that his administration had taken tentative diplomatic steps to open a dialogue with Rouhani. Far from indicating an easing of tensions, however, Obama's comments foreshadowed greater military menaces against Iran. "My view is that if you have both a credible threat of force, combined with a rigorous diplomatic effort, that, in fact you can ... strike a deal," he declared.

In fact, Obama only drew back from the brink of attacking Syria when it became apparent that the US Congress, faced with overwhelming popular opposition, would not pass his war resolution. The White House remains committed to regime change in Syria, which is part of its preparation for military confrontation with Iran. The moves toward a US-Iran dialogue take place within this context.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Obama and Rouhani exchanged private letters, including on Syria, following Rouhani's installation as president last month. Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said and senior UN official Jeffrey Feltman, formerly a US assistant

secretary of state under Obama, reportedly acted as go-betweens.

Rouhani is due in New York later this week to attend the UN General Assembly, where a possible meeting with Obama has been mooted. British Foreign Secretary William Hague has already indicated that he will meet his Iranian counterpart—Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif. Meetings between Iranian and other European officials have also been foreshadowed.

Rouhani won the June election with the backing of key figures from the so-called reformist faction of the Iranian regime—former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatemi. His efforts to open up talks with the US are in line with their advocacy of a rapprochement with Washington in order to open Iran up to desperately needed foreign investment.

For Rouhani to proceed, however, indicates the tacit support of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the ultimate say over the country's foreign and defence policies, including its nuclear programs. Sections of the Iranian ruling class are clearly desperate for a way out of the economic disaster produced by the crippling sanctions imposed by the US and its allies that have led to rising social tensions within Iran.

The Central Bank of Iran confirmed earlier this month that the country's economy shrank by 5.4 percent in the Iranian calendar year ending March 20. The bank also announced that inflation for the year to August 22 had reached 39 percent. Other estimates put the figure far higher, especially for basic food items and consumer goods. The official unemployment rate, also regarded as grossly understated, was 12.4 percent in July and 24.2 percent for those aged under 30.

Without an easing of US-led sanctions, the economic crisis in Iran will only deepen. As has been the case in previous international negotiations, however, Obama will use any talks with Rouhani to extract concessions from the Iranian regime, while offering little or nothing in return. At the same time, Washington will maintain and even heighten the “credible threat of force” against Iran, further destabilising the entire region.

The primary US aim in Iran is not to dismantle the country's nuclear programs, but to change the regime in Tehran in line with American ambitions to dominate the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central

Asia.



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