

US seeks to placate Mideast allies angered by Iran nuclear deal

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US President Barack Obama is dispatching Defense Secretary Ashton Carter to the Middle East to placate Israel and Saudi Arabia, key US allies that are angered by Washington's recent nuclear accord with Iran.

Under the accord, Tehran has agreed to dismantle key parts of its civil nuclear program, roll back and freeze others for 10-15 years, and submit to the most intrusive inspections regime ever devised. In return, and only after Iran completes the dismantling and rollback, the US and its European Union allies are to lift the punishing economic sanctions that have halved Iran's oil exports and denied it access to some \$150 billion of its own money—a sum equivalent to almost 30 percent of Iran's annual GDP.

For years to come, the sanctions will only be suspended, however. They can be re-imposed should the US and its European Union allies deem Iran to have violated its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program reached Tuesday between Iran, the US, the four other permanent UN Security Council members, and Germany.

While no specifics have been provided, Obama and his top aides have indicated that Defense Secretary Carter will offer Israel and the Saudi monarchy new weapons systems and enhanced intelligence cooperation and security guarantees. In Israel's case some or all of the new weaponry may be gifted.

Carter “will be continuing our practical cooperation with both Israel and our partners in the Gulf,” Obama's National Security Adviser Susan Rice told Reuters Wednesday. The previous day the Pentagon had said Carter would be traveling to Israel for “close consultation on security issues ... as we remain vigilant in countering the Iranian regime's destabilizing activities in the region.”

Israel's opposition to the nuclear agreement is no surprise. For years Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been railing against Iran and threatening to attack its civil nuclear facilities, while authorizing Mossad to work with the US to mount cyber warfare against Iran and assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists. Earlier this year, Netanyahu connived with the Republicans, behind the backs of Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, to secure an invitation to Washington to denounce the nuclear negotiations with Iran from the floor of the US Congress.

Nevertheless, the vehemence of Netanyahu's opposition and that of his government to this week's agreement has shocked and angered the US's European allies. It is also causing concern within Israel's political elite and military-security establishment that

Netanyahu may be doing permanent damage to Israel's relations with the US.

Netanyahu has termed the nuclear deal a “stunning, historic, mistake” that provides “Iran a sure path to nuclear weapons.” Last week, when it was apparent that only the final details of the agreement still needed to be hammered out, Israel's Prime Minister accused Iran of pursuing aggression in “every corner of the world” and harboring “the ultimate true aim of taking over the world.” This from the head of a nuclear-armed state that was founded on the dispossession of the Palestinian people and routinely bombards and invades its neighbors.

Netanyahu's aides have told the Israeli daily *Haaretz* that he is ready to “kill himself” pursuing the last remaining option for scuttling the deal,” rallying sufficient opposition within the US Congress to withstand a presidential veto.

Thus far Obama has bent over backwards to placate Netanyahu. He had a lengthy phone conversation with the Israeli prime minister Tuesday during which he reportedly reiterated an offer of “expanded security cooperation.” But, according to US Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, Netanyahu “wasn't ready to have this conversation yet.”

In a *New York Times* interview Obama indicated he would not make an issue of Netanyahu's efforts to conspire with his Republican political opponents to defeat an agreement he has touted as advancing the US's “national security interests.” Netanyahu might think “he can further influence the congressional debate,” said Obama, “... But after that's done, if that's what [Israel's prime minister] thinks is appropriate,” the two “will sit down” to discuss how the US can enhance Israel's military capabilities and security.

An Israeli who held a “senior position in the defense apparatus” until recently told *Al-Monitor* in May that Washington has offered to “upgrade” and extend strategic relations with Tel Aviv, but this “irrevocable strategic opportunity” is “not happening” despite US willingness.

European leaders have been more ready to publicly spar with Netanyahu.

Responding to the Israeli government's chorus of denunciations, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, “This is a responsible deal and Israel should also take a closer look at it and not criticize the agreement in a very coarse way.”

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond accused Israel of wanting to ensure Iran was permanently locked in conflict with the

US and other western powers: “The question you have to ask yourself is what kind of a deal would have been welcomed in Tel Aviv? The answer, of course, is that Israel doesn’t want any deal with Iran. Israel wants a permanent state of stand-off and I don’t believe that’s in the interests of the region. I don’t believe it’s in our interest.”

During the three-and-a-half decades since the 1979 revolution that toppled the US-backed Shah and his brutal regime, Washington has mounted an unrelenting campaign of bullying, sanctions and threats of war against Iran. US imperialism has never reconciled itself to the loss of Iran as a client state and staging area for asserting its predatory interests in the Middle East and Central Asia, and has been determined to force Iran’s clerical-bourgeois rulers to forgo any challenge to US domination of the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

The unsubstantiated claim that Tehran has been seeking to develop nuclear weapons has always been a secondary issue in this. It was first trumpeted by Washington in 2003, following the US’s illegal invasion of Iraq and as the Bush administration sought to lay the groundwork for a regime change war targeting Iran.

In 2007, the US’s intelligence agencies themselves issued a report, to the dismay of then Vice President Dick Cheney, that concluded there was no evidence Iran’s nuclear program had a military dimension. Yet the US continued to ratchet up the confrontation with Iran. In 2011, the Obama administration and the US’s EU allies imposed upon Iran the most sweeping economic sanctions ever implemented against a state outside of a war.

Now the Obama administration has begun to implement a major tactical shift in US policy. It is seeking to exploit the growing fears within the Iranian bourgeoisie of a working class challenge to its rule. These efforts have been aided by the return to power in Tehran of the political faction of the clerical-bourgeois elite most amenable to rapprochement with Washington. Traditionally associated with the ex-Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, this faction is now led by his protégé, President Hasan Rouhani.

Two key calculations lie behind Obama’s shift toward a “diplomatic solution” with Iran: that the ratcheting down of the conflict with Teheran will assist the US in pursuing its military-strategic offensives against its more formidable adversaries, Russia and China; and that Iran can be bent to serve US strategic interests in the Middle East and, in the longer term, through a combination of threats and inducements, including an influx of western capital, “turned” against Russia and China.

This strategic shift is being bitterly contested by sections of the US ruling elite, including the Republicans and the *Wall Street Journal*, who are demanding as a precondition iron-clad guarantees of Tehran’s total subservience. It is also being opposed by the Israeli bourgeoisie and by the Saudi monarchy because they fear that any US accommodation with Tehran will result in a diminishing of their role as Washington’s principal regional allies.

Obama’s affirmation in his *New York Times* interview that Iran “will be and should be a regional power” will only further incense Netanyahu and the Saudi oil-sheiks.

Riyadh, while far less outspoken in its criticisms of the nuclear accord, has nonetheless made clear its dissatisfaction, including by

stating that it may soon conclude a major arms deal with Moscow. While not condemning the nuclear agreement outright, a Saudi official told Reuters he feared it would allow Iran “to wreak havoc in the region.”

An article published by the *Politico* website this week reported, “Obama administration officials are keenly aware of Iran’s potential, at least in theory, for helping to solve a slew of devilish problems in a region Obama sees as a strategic sand trap (and) at a time when China and its neighbors demand more US attention.”

It further noted that the administration is “mindful” that under George W. Bush Washington spurned Iranian overtures after Teheran had assisted the US invasion of Afghanistan and the installation of Hamid Karzai as the country’s puppet ruler. (In fact, there is a decades-long history of the rulers of the Islamic Republic seeking an accommodation with US imperialism.)

But, according to *Politico*, the Obama administration now faces a dilemma: on the one hand, it is eager to explore the potential of leveraging the nuclear agreement with Tehran to pressure it to cut off support to its close ally Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and facilitate the US drive for regime-change in Damascus; but on the other, it fears that if it moves too quickly in the direction of promoting an Iranian role in bringing about a “political settlement” in Syria this will only further antagonize Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States.

The article concludes by citing the remarks of former Obama Pentagon and State Department official Ilan Goldenberg. “The core debate,” says Goldenberg, “is, will it be engagement (with Iran) first with some push back—or push back with some engagement?”

Goldenberg, who now works for the Center for a New American Security, himself advocates the stepping up of the US’s efforts to support, arm and train anti-Assad insurgents so as to “send our partners a signal that we’re not pivoting strategically to Iran.”



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