

NÜKLEER BİR İRAN'A YÖNELİK OBAMA'NIN POLİTİKALARINI ANLAMAK

ÖZ

Obama seçildikten sonra, Bush döneminden kendisine miras kalan ABD'nin imaj sorununu çözümlenecek şekilde ABD dış politikasında değişim ve dönüşüm gerçekleştireceğine söz vermiştir. Obama'nın bu girişimi, çok hararetle bir tartışmanın süregeldiği dönemde ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu tartışma, ABD'nin değişen uluslararası sistemde küresel lider olarak rolünün nasıl bir dönüşüme uğradığı konusundadır. Pek çok görüşe göre, Pax Americana artık sona ermiştir ve ABD'nin ekonomik gücü inişe geçmiştir. Amerikan hegemonyasını dengeleyen yeni güçlerin ortaya çıkması bir başka tartışmayı; tek kutuplu sistemin yerini çok kutuplu bir sisteme bıraktığı tartışmasını beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu çerçevede, makalede değişen uluslararası sistemde ABD'nin halen global bir lider olarak konumunu sürdürüp sürdürmediği sorusuna yanıt aranacaktır. İkinci olarak, Obama dönemi ABD'nin nükleer meseleye karşı izlediği politikalar ele alınarak, İran'a karşı izlenen politikaların genel çerçevesinde bir değişimin gerçekleşip gerçekleşmediği analiz edilecektir. Son olarak, Obama'nın nükleerden arındırılmış yeni dünya düzeni yaratma çabası değerlendirilerek, Geçici Cenevre Anlaşması üzerinde durulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan üstünlüğü, tek kutupluluk, nükleer, İran, Geçici Cenevre Anlaşması

فهم وتحليل سياسة اوباما تجاه النووي الإيراني اوزدن زينب اوكتاو خلاصة

وعد الرئيس اوباما بعد انتخابه بانه سيقوم بحل مشكلة النظرة السيئة للعالم تجاه الولايات المتحدة الامريكية، التي كان قد ورثها عن جورج بوش، وذلك من خلال اتباع سياسة خارجية تعتمد على التغيير والتحول. محاولة اوباما هذه ظهرت عندما كانت تمر الولايات المتحدة بمرحلة حساسة للغاية. هذه المرحلة المليئة بالخلافات كانت متعلقة بالتحول الذي شهده الدور الامريكي باعتبارها القوة العظمى والقائد العالمي في النظام الدولي.

وبحسب العديد من الآراء، فانه قد انتهى عصر باكس امريكانا وان الاقتصاد الامريكي بدأ يمر بمرحلة الانحدار. اما بالنسبة لنقطة الخلاف الاخرى التي تخص ضعف قوة امريكا امام القوى الجديدة التي ظهرت لتحذ من قوي امريكا، فهي تلك التي نتجت عن الخلاف الذي حدث نتيجة التحول من النظام احادي القطب الي النظام المتعدد الاقطاب.

وفي هذا الاطار سيتم الاجابة في هذا المقال على السؤال الذي يبحث عن مدى امكانية استمرار الولايات المتحدة الامريكية كقوة عظمى في النظام العالمي المتغير... اما بالنسبة للنقطة الثانية التي ستتم مناقشتها من خلال المقال، فهي سياسة امريكا تجاه السلاح النووي خلال عهد اوباما ثم سيتم تحليل سياسات امريكا تجاه ايران وهل شهدت العلاقات تحولا ام لم تشهد.

واخيرا سيتم تقييم محاولة اوباما خلق عالم جديد تم تنقيته من الاسلحة النووية. كما انه سيتم الوقوف ايضا حول معاهدة جنيف المؤقتة.

الكلمات الدالة: التفوق الامريكي، النظام احادي الاقطاب، النووي، ايران، معاهدة جانورا المؤقتة.

UNDERSTANDING OBAMA'S POLICIES TOWARDS A NUCLEAR IRAN*

ABSTRACT

Obama took office promising considerable change in US foreign policy so as to cope with image deterioration stemming from George W. Bush's period. This new foreign policy initiative under Obama came in the midst of a hot debate concerning the evolving role of the United States as a global leader in a changing international environment. According to many, pax Americana has come to an end and US relative economic power is declining. The rise of new powers acting as counterweights to American hegemony brings about another hot debate whether the unipolarity has been replaced with multi polarity. In this context, the article will first question whether the United States still dominates as a global power in a changing international environment with a special emphasis on the impact of systemic constraints on Washington's policies towards Iranian nuclear issue. Second part of the study will focus on Obama's policies towards nuclear problem so as to understand whether general contours of Washington's policies towards Iran have changed or not. Lastly, Obama's efforts to create a global zero will be evaluated. In this context, the interim Geneva Agreement will be one of the main concerns of the article.

Keywords: US primacy, unipolarity, nuclear, Iran, the Geneva Interim Agreement

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Ortadoğu Etütleri
Volume 6, No 1,
July 2014, pp.64-82

* This article has been realized owing to the scholarship granted by TUBITAK 2219 BİDEB, Ankara, Turkey.

In US National Security Strategy (2010), Obama says “we must now build the sources of American strength and influence, and shape an international order capable of overcoming the challenges of the 21st century.” This speech of Obama came in the midst of a hot debate about whether the international system is rapidly becoming multipolar and America’s relative power is declining. The United States today lives in a world that is far from its golden age beginning with the end of the Cold War. The 2008 fiscal crisis and China’s rise both on global and regional level are the two important developments which had a very negative impact on the primacy of United States.

The article will first question whether the United States still dominates as a global power in a changing international environment with a special emphasis on the impact of systemic constraints on Washington’s policies towards Iranian nuclear issue. Second part of the study will focus on Obama’s policies towards nuclear problem so as to understand whether general contours of Washington’s policies towards Iran have changed or not. Lastly, Obama’s efforts to create a global zero will be evaluated. In this context, the Geneva Interim Agreement will be one of the main concerns of the article.

Does American Power still Persist?

As George Washington warned about in his farewell address, the United States has long favored internationalism rather than isolationism. The mission of shaping the international order by making the rest of the world believe in the universal validity of American principles, practices, and institutions has become one traditional element of US foreign policy. During the Bush Administration period, it was believed that the roots of Islamic extremism could be cut by promoting democracy in the Arab world not just in a slow gradual way, but with fervor and force.¹ While Bush was overestimating America’s ability to export democracy, he did not mention the United Nations in the 2002 national security strategy and presumed that the United States was the sole judge of the legitimacy of its own or anyone else’s preemptive strikes in the face of the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction. With the Bush period, Washington left internationalism instead, it exalted US thinking. As Dunn notes, “not only does the US regard itself as the indispensable power in the international system, it also believes that the export of its model of government – liberal democratic market capitalism – is a universal good.”² Following the Bush period during which the United States made two poor choices, invasion of Iraq and fighting in Afghanistan, Washington has come face to face with two important developments imperiling its global primacy. One was the

¹ Thomas Carothers, “Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2003, p.92

² David Hastings Dunn, “Myths, Motivations and Misperceptions: The Bush Administration and Iraq”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 2, 2003, pp. 279-297.

2008 global economic crisis; the second one was the rise of China so as to put an end to the lack of balance in the system.

From 2005 onwards, the image deterioration of the United States especially in the Middle East and limited results of the Bush doctrine urged the United States to return to the more typical pattern of American internationalism³ and to adopt more forthcoming attitude in its foreign policy.

Obama's extension of hand to Iran in his inauguration speech should be read against this background. He said "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist" and addressed to the people of poor nations pledging "to work alongside them to make their farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds", and rebuked "the leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West."⁴ Most important of all, with the need to change negative image of the United States stemming from the Bush period, he gave the message that the United States would be the protector of the suppressed masses so as to emphasize that it does not need soft balancing any more. Again his speech in the Turkish Parliament and in Cairo also created a sense of euphoria especially in the Middle East. However, the issue is that those speeches were made by Obama at a time when it was debated that the United States as a hegemon power, was in decline and the unipolarity was replaced by multipolarity so as to undermine the primacy of the United States. According to many, Washington's remaining passive in dealing with the Syrian civil war, its efforts to reconcile with Iran on nuclear issue are the only two examples with respect to understanding that Washington has been reluctant to continue to have an overstretched hegemony. This has had a very negative impact on US economy, while other nations such as China has been able to flourish economically.

According to Layne, "three main drivers explain the impending end of the *Pax Americana*. First, the rise of new great powers – especially China – is transforming the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity. Second, the United States is becoming a poster child for strategic over-extension, or imperial overstretch. Its strategic commitments exceed the resources available to support them. Third, the United States' relative economic power is in a decline."⁵ The other declinist analysts allege that the weakening of the US economy will also make it increasingly difficult to sustain the level of military commitments that US hegemony requires. However, some analysts like Brooks and Wohlforth defend the idea that current system is unipolar and

³Jeffrey W Legro, "The mix that makes unipolarity: hegemonic purpose and international constraints", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No.2, 2011, p. 189.

⁴ "As It Happened: Obama Inauguration", *BBC News*, 20 January 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/obama_inauguration/7840646.stm

⁵ Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Exit, Beyond the Pax Americana", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No.2, 2011, p.150.

the US poor choices such as invasion of Iraq and fighting in Afghanistan had serious consequences, however, their origins are not systemic and not relevant with the weakening US military and economic position.⁶ Moreover, “proponents of the current *Pax Americana* foreign policy believe the debt bomb and the resultant looming fiscal crisis have no implications for America’s strategy of global dominance and worldwide military presence.”⁷ For example, Bromley, citing the views of Brooks and Wohlforth who defend the idea that a hegemon in a unipolar world will not be subject to significant systemic constraints, argues that “the counterbalancing constraint is inoperative and will remain so until the distribution of capabilities changes fundamentally.”⁸ Legro, on the other hand, emphasizes that, rather than the lack of balance and systemic factors, more attention should be paid on the way that systemic factors in world politics might inspire US domestic opposition to primacy. According to him, “it seems that systemic effects – perhaps other states opposing the United States, a loss of trading privileges, or anti-American sentiment – arguably does mould US domestic resistance to global projects.”⁹ For example, one of the main reason for the turn of domestic opinion against the policy activism of the ‘Bush doctrine’ is related to the decline in US international standing.

On the other hand, Glaser who questions value of unipolarity for the US interests, thinks that states are not energetically balancing against the United States. This is mainly due to the fact that the rising powers who already embrace the Western norms, do not believe that the United States poses a large threat to their vital interests. Therefore, according to him, the lack of counterbalancing is not best explained by America’s large advantage in power.¹⁰ The analysts like Kupchan view it highly dangerous and unrealistic to presume the newly emerging countries are not challenging the pecking order and the guiding norms of international system. On the contrary, the rising powers like India call for ‘new global “rules of the game” and the ‘reform and revitalization’ of international institutions. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have increased the voting weight of developing countries; and the United Nations Security Council is coming under growing pressure to enlarge the voices of emerging powers. All of these developments come at the expense of the influence and normative preferences of the United States and its Western allies.”¹¹ In a similar vein, Voeten argues that despite

⁶ Stephen G Brooks & William C Wohlforth, “Assessing the balance”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2011, p. 207.

⁷ Layne, *Pax Americana*, p. 156.

⁸ Simon Bromley, “The limits to balancing”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol 24, No.2, 2011 130.

⁹ Jeffrey W Legro, “The mix that makes unipolarity: hegemonic purpose and international constraints”, p. 194.

¹⁰ Charles L Glaser, “Why unipolarity doesn’t matter (much)”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No.2, 2011, p. 137.

¹¹ Charles A Kupchan, “The false promise of unipolarity: constraints on the exercise of American power”,

the disproportionate power of the United States, neither the US allies nor the rest are in a position of desperate dependence. For example, "European states have sufficient resources to support or even to create institutions they like, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). After the Asian financial crisis, Asian countries sought to reduce their dependence on the US dominated IMF by creating the Chiang Mai Initiative, aided by the large reserves held by many Asian states. Voeten emphasizes that if US is not appreciated, many states find ways to manage on their own."¹²

Here the question of crucial importance is related to the impact of unipolarity on the rest of the world. Schweller criticizes Brooks and Wohlforth because they only emphasize the relative absence of systemic constraints on the dominant power under unipolarity and seem much less interested in unipolarity's effects on the rest of the world. Schweller's question, "Does unipolarity exert meaningful structural constraints on any state?"¹³ is really important in order to understand current policies of Iran on nuclear issue. Moreover, the debates concerning systemic constraints on the dominant power, the United States under unipolarity also seem explanatory for understanding the dramatic change of Washington's attitude towards Iranian nuclear issue under Obama.

What Has Changed in US policies towards a Nuclear Iran under Obama?

Iran whose pursuit of nuclear capability goes as far as back the 1960s, increased its uranium enrichment program in the face of accusations of hiding uranium enrichment at Natanz which first came to the agenda in 2002 with the declaration of Iranian exile opposition group.

At a time when the Bush administration occupied Iraq and threatened Iran and Syria, Iran first announced that it would allow IAEA inspections and in November 2003, suspended its nuclear program although IAEA concluded that there was no evidence of program. However, Washington insistently alleged that Iran's ultimate aim was to be a nuclear power which from Washington's perspective would dynamite some major goals/interests of the United States such as "providing security for the oil and gas supply, eliminating threats from terrorist organizations, preventing the spread of WMDs and maintaining Israel's existence and qualitative military advantage."¹⁴

Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2011, p. 171.

¹² Erik Voeten, "Unipolar politics as usual", Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2011, p. 121

¹³ Randall L Schweller, "The future is uncertain and the end is always near", Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2011, p.178.

¹⁴ Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, "Iran's Nuclear Program and the Future of US-Iranian Relations", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XVI, No. 1, Spring 2009, p. 125.

In addition, the three factors “discredited the peaceful nuclear energy argument of Iran. First of all, Iran kept its nuclear program secret until it was discovered in 2002. Secondly, there were alleged military connections and weaponization studies connected to the nuclear program as well as missile development. Lastly, from an economic perspective, indigenous enrichment was not logical.”¹⁵

In parallel with increasing threats of the President Bush who made “clear warnings to Syria and Iran that they were next in his sights in his declared mission to spread democracy around the world,”¹⁶ uranium enrichment program became an important tool in Iranian foreign policy to upgrade its prestige in the world and to show that Iran was not so weak actor .

Beginning with 2007, Washington saw that it would be to the detriment of the United States to continue such arrogant policies towards Iran due to some important reasons. First of all, rhetoric of spreading democracy to Iran did not work, on the contrary, it pushed Tehran to adopt more anti-Israeli rhetoric which addressed to the Arab streets and to demonstrate how Iran was an influential actor in the region. Put differently, the new role which Iran cast itself was the fulfillment of a leading role in a region where Shias consist of the majority; the establishment of Iranian superiority over its Arab neighbors, which dates back to the Pahlavi regime.

This became evident with Hezbollah’s triumph in 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon. This had a shower effect on both Israel and the United States since it was very well known that Hezbollah’s triumph was to a great extent due to Iranian support to create a Shia crescent in the Middle East. Besides, Iran’s meddling with Iraqi Shia groups so as to prevent the stability in Iraq is another threat to American interests in the region. Second, the striking fact is that Iran is an independent actor from US influence when it comes to oil and gas production and transportation. Thirdly, Iran has been capable of making its own energy-export deals with Russia, China and Turkey. Most important of all, Iran has the ability to block the Strait of Hormuz and cut the Gulf’s oil traffic in half, a disaster for the region as well as the West.

In sum, Iran has lots of geopolitical advantages such as having access to the world’s two energy-rich regions, the Middle East and the Caspian Basin, controlling North-south and east-west control of energy transit lines and having great land mass and inhospitable terrain.¹⁷ Currently, Iran uses all these

¹⁵ Mark Fitzpatrick, “The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Avoiding Worst- Case Outcomes” (Adelphi Papers; The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008) in Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, p. 124.

¹⁶ “Bush Warns Iran and Syria Over Terrorism”, *Guardian Co.Uk*, February 3, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/feb/03/syria.usa>

¹⁷ Nihat Ali Özcan and Özgür Özdamar, *Iran’s Nuclear Program and the Future of US-Iranian Relations*, p. 125.

advantages as a leverage against the predominance of the United States in the region. The US-Iranian relations which were entangled in a cycle of distrust and confrontation for about 30 years took a different shape partly due to above-mentioned Iran's geopolitical advantages but primarily to the fact that the US occupation forces in Iraq were confronted with ever-growing instability in 2007. The United States who gradually saw that it needed Iran in Iraq, Afghanistan, energy matters (challenging Russia's leverage over Europe), the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war on terror (fighting al-Qaeda as the common enemy) cautiously tried to engage Iran beginning with 2007.¹⁸

However, there are some basic reasons why Washington and Tehran have not been able to come to a full agreement especially on nuclear issue so far. From Iran's perspective, the driving motive behind the negotiations with the West on nuclear issue has been to get rid of sense of being encirclement since the early years of the revolution. However, the more Iran felt isolated by the international society, primarily by the West and lost its confidence in the sincerity of the West, the more it sought to be a nuclear power.¹⁹ For example, Farhi notes that "the history of Islamic Iran's treatment in international organizations, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war years, led the public to agree that international organizations such as the IAEA were political tools of important international players, such as the United States, in their quest to deny Iranian technological advancement and progress."²⁰ Another important point worth to be mentioned is the fact that, the pressure on Iranian uranium enrichment is commented as hypocrisy of the United Nations, while Israel never signed the NPT and Washington openly supports Israel on international platforms.²¹ Most important of all, the West puts the negotiations into an impasse by asking Iran to give up its principal card (full fuel cycle suspension) before negotiations begin. This clearly shows that Iran is demanded to accept its weak status before the negotiations start. This would, of course, result in marginalizing the Iranian administration and strengthening the hands of

¹⁸ Paul Aarts and Joris van Dujne, "Saudi Arabia After US-Iranian Detante: Left in the Lurch?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, Fall 2009, p. 67.

¹⁹ See Saideh Lotfian, "Nuclear Policy and International Relations", Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (eds), *Iran in the 21st Century, Politics, Economics and Conflict*, (Routledge, New York, 2008), pp. 158-180.

²⁰ Farideh Farhi, "Atomic Energy is Our Assured Right: Nuclear Policy and the Iranian Shaping Public Opinion" in Judith Yaphe (ed.), *Nuclear Politics in Iran*, Center for Strategic Research Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, (National Defense University Press, Washington, 2010), p. 6.

²¹ For example, when UN approved the declaration calling for 2012 conference on "WMD-free" zone in Middle, East, Ellen Tauscher, the US under-secretary of state for arms control, said "the United States deeply regrets" that the draft pressures Israel to join the NPT. "Israel Under Pressure to Join NPT", *Al Jazeera*, 30 May 2010.

those who advocate a more confrontational stance with the West and the United States who from their perspective, was trapped in a quagmire in Iraq.²²

Put differently, as Farhi explains “the risky and daring nature of the program, in the face of international opposition and technological hurdles, was an important selling point in generating the pride as well as the zeal necessary to support the program. Indeed, the conflation of Iran’s nuclear program and general scientific advancement was an important strategy in the government’s attempt to present the nuclear program as the cornerstone of efforts to modernize the country, narrow the technological divide with the West, and frustrate the Western objective of hindering Iran’s scientific and technological progress.”²³

From Washington’s perspective, Obama, alleging that the countries such as Iran are more likely to want to cooperate than not cooperate, showed more respect for the Muslim world, and started to listen to others.²⁴ However, because the leitmotivs of Obama’s speeches concerning the Middle East are to contain Iran and to secure Israel, his efforts to bring America closer to Iran such as giving Nowruz message marking the Iranian New Year, addressing both the Iranian people and its leaders remained fruitless. For example, in his article Obama says:

The world must work to stop Iran’s uranium-enrichment program and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It is far too dangerous to have nuclear weapons in the hands of a radical theocracy. At the same time, we must show Iran -- and especially the Iranian people -- what could be gained from fundamental change: economic engagement, security assurances, and diplomatic relations. Diplomacy combined with pressure could also reorient Syria away from its radical agenda to a more moderate stance -- which could, in turn, help stabilize Iraq, isolate Iran, free Lebanon from Damascus’ grip, and better secure Israel.²⁵

²² Nader Entessar, “Iran’s Nuclear Decision-Making Calculus”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, Summer 2009, p. 32.

²³ Farideh Farhi, “Atomic Energy is Our Assured Right: Nuclear Policy and the Iranian Shaping Public Opinion, p. 8.

²⁴ “I think the most important thing to start with is dialogue. When you have a chance to meet people from other cultures and other countries, and you listen to them and you find out that, even though you may speak a different language or you may have a different religious faith, it turns out that you care about your family, you have your same hopes about being able to have a career that is useful to the society, you hope that you can raise a family of your own, and that your children will be healthy and have good education—that all those things that human beings all around the world share are more important than the things that are different”. Transcript – “President Obama’s Remarks at a Student Roundtable in Turkey,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/04/07/us/politics/07obama-turkey-transcript.html

²⁵ Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007.

Here the issue is that Obama's goal of containing the "other", Iran (isolating Iran) and securing Israel is not so much different from that of Bush period and even reflects the goal of Truman period whose priority was the containment of the "other", Soviet Union.

However, it should be borne in mind that Truman's idea that "if the United States failed in its leadership the peace of the world can be endangered"²⁶ has been no more valid due to dramatic economic, political, socio-cultural changes in the Middle East in the 21st century. Here the issue is to what extent Obama "shares common assumptions and bring the assumptions into harmony"²⁷ with Iran which Habermas defines as "lifeworld." The problem is to what extent Obama's communication share a view of the world with Iran. According to Habermas, language is used for more than just conveying facts and opinions about the world. Rather language is used to establish social relationship with others. To achieve this, one needs to reconstruct the rules that competent agents must follow in order to communicate with each other. Habermas draws attention to universal pragmatics and according to him "universal pragmatics is the ability not just to formulate meaningful sentences but rather to engage to others in interaction, drawing on an awareness of the cultural and physical environment within which they act in order to begin communication and to repair breakdowns in communication."²⁸

In this context, Obama did his utmost effort to use universal pragmatics. Put differently, he has tried to strengthen the belief that United States is not a "hegemon defining its strength - in terms of its ability to achieve or maintain dominance over others, but in terms of its ability to work *with* others in the interests of the international community as a whole. American foreign policy is consciously intended to advance *universal values*."²⁹ The main rationale behind advancing universal values is – in Habermas's words – to engage others in interaction. However, Obama's efforts to generate a communication to repair breakdowns has been met with a cold response by Tehran due to Bush legacy which widened discrepancy between what was officially said and stated and what was eventually done or pursued.³⁰

²⁶ Dennis Merrill, "The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol.36, No.1, March 2006, pp. 27–37.

²⁷ Andrew Edgar, *Habermas The Key Concepts*, (New York, Routledge, 2006), p.162.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 164.

²⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Super Power", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2, March-April 1999, p. 38.

³⁰ Rouzbeh Parsi, "The Obama Effect and the Iranian Conundrum" in Álvaro de Vasconcelos and Marcin Zaborowski (eds), *The Obama Moment European and American Perspective*, European Union Institute For Security Studies, p. 155, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/The_Obama_Moment_web_A4.pdf

Dramatic shift in American Presidents' rhetoric towards Iran, in other words, a sudden transition from the 'Axis of Evil' to "extending hand" rhetoric did not heal the wounds so as to restore the mutual trust at once. The reasons are manifold. Apart from the Bush legacy, the traditional US bias towards Israel has seriously affected the image of the United States held by the wider Islamic world.³¹ This became most evident in the Bush period during which the Islamic world strongly believed that Washington lost its sense of its moral proportion.³² This not only affected America's relations with uncooperative regimes like Iran and Iraq but also undermined its relations with allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia where the governments did not want to give the impression that they were in close relations with Washington in the face of the growing public hostility to America.

Another important point worth to be mentioned is the fact that beginning with 1970s, the United States started to import oil and thus became vulnerable to the Arab oil weapon. In addition, the emergence of Far Eastern and East Asian nations as important consumers of oil strengthened Arabs' as well as Iran's hand against the United States and thus gave Middle Eastern oil weapon a new dimension. Therefore, Washington's insistence on tilting towards Israel and open hostility towards uncooperative regimes like Iran and Iraq reflecting the Cold War style policies has not only antagonized its allies but also undermined its own policy objective of secure oil supply.

In a nutshell, it can be said that US policy on Iranian nuclear issue has not gone through dramatic change. However, when looking closely, Barack Obama who was nominated and finally awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009, had a personal commitment to nuclear elimination. His speech in Prague on the 5th of April 2009, during which he declared: "So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" is therefore noteworthy.³³

The US Nuclear Policy under Obama and Its Impact on US- Iran Relations

The important steps taken by Washington on the way of eliminating nuclear weapons are congruent with Obama's forthcoming attitude towards Iran on

³¹ For further information see: Trita Parsi, "Israeli-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic Competition From the Power Cycle Perspective" in Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (eds), *Iran in the 21st Century, Politics, Economics and Conflict*, (Routledge, New York, 2008), pp 136-157.

³² Eric Watkins, "The Unfolding US Policy in the Middle East", *International Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 3.

³³ President Obama's speech in Prague on 5th of April 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/ cited in Tom Sauer, "A Nuclear Iran: Trigger for a Renewed Emphasis by the Obama Administration on the Goal of Nuclear Elimination", ECPR Standing Group on International Relations Conference, Stockholm, 9-11 2010.

nuclear issue. The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), released in April 2010 is, forexample, noteworthy because it de-emphasized the role of the US nuclear deterrent. Nonnuclear weapon states that are in compliance with their NPT obligations would not be threatened with US nuclear weapons anymore. "In May 2010, the US for the first time ever revealed the exact numbers of nuclear weapons in its arsenal. This level of transparency is unprecedented for any nuclear weapon state."³⁴ Obama's Prague speech made in April 2009 is of crucial importance because he, before he became president, hinted that he would seek a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons.

There are two impetus behind Obama's enthusiasm for his quest for a global zero. One is related to the fact that "the large numbers of nuclear weapons arguably appear to represent a graver threat to the US security in the post-9-11 world than perhaps they did during much of the Cold War."³⁵ According to Obama, "the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up."³⁶ In an interview Obama also emphasized that "the biggest threat that people now confront is probably not an attack from a nuclear weapons state, but from nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation".³⁷ Put differently, the emergence of rogue states such as North Korea, Iran who acquire or want to acquire a nuclear weapons capability and the probability of the spread of nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorist groups have been quite alarming for US national interests. Therefore, Obama has been spending great effort to reestablish the norm of nuclear non-proliferation with a special emphasis on US being only power having a "moral responsibility to act".

The second impetus behind Obama's efforts for "global zero" is to reduce US reliance upon nuclear weapons and to reconfigure US national security and nuclear weapons thinking to the changing requirements of the post-Cold War world. While doing this, Washington tries to "find a balance between nuclear and conventional weapons that better reflects current US security requirements so as to make a contribution to the international efforts for disarmament."³⁸

³⁴ Tom Sauer, "A Nuclear Iran: Trigger for a Renewed Emphasis by the Obama Administration on the Goal of Nuclear Elimination", p.3.

³⁵ Andrew Futter, "The United States after unipolarity: Obama's nuclear weapons policy in a changing world" in Nicholas Kitchen, (ed.), *LSE IDEAS, IDEAS reports - special reports*, SR009, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

³⁶ President Obama's speech in Prague on 5th of April 2009.

³⁷ David Sanger and Peter Baker, 'Excerpts From Obama Interview', *The New York Times*, 5 April 2010.

³⁸ Andrew Futter, "The United States after unipolarity: Obama's nuclear weapons policy in a changing world", p.14.

In the light of all these developments, an interim agreement with Iran signed by the P5+1 group of nations – the US, the UK, Russia, China, France and Germany – on November 24, 2013 is quite promising and a positive development for having a world free from nuclear weapons as well as for Iranian integration to the international society both on economic and political level.

The Geneva Interim Agreement

The Geneva Agreement, after negotiations on technical procedures went into force from January 20, 2014 for six months. With the agreement, in return for limited sanctions relief, Iran consented to halt its 20% enrichment program, the output of which is usable for nuclear medicine and can be further enriched to weapons-grade (90%). Tehran also consented to allow frequent access to UN inspectors.³⁹ The lifting of sanctions on petrochemical products, insurance, gold and other precious metals, passenger plane parts and services will, for sure, keep floundering Iranian economy afloat. Moreover, the US and EU also plan to release USD 4.2 billion in Iranian assets (oil revenues) blocked overseas, in eight installments over six months. The deal permits Iran's six current customers, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey to purchase Iranian oil at current levels. When given the fact that the Iranian crippled economy is getting worse with each passing day⁴⁰, the

³⁹ Iran also consented to cap uranium enrichment levels at 5 percent for the next six months, ceasing enrichment to the near-bomb-grade 20 percent level, to neutralize its existing stockpile of 20 percent material through oxidation (for use in fuel assemblies) and dilution. (No reconversion line for reversing the oxidation process is allowed), to cap its 3.5 percent low-enriched uranium (LEU) stockpile by oxidizing a portion equivalent to whatever additional amount it produces over the next six months, to freeze current capacity at the Natanz and Fordow enrichment plants by ceasing additional installation and operation of IR-1 centrifuges and agreeing not to operate existing advanced IR-2m centrifuges or install new ones. (Centrifuge production can continue only for repairs to existing machines), not to commission the Arak heavy water reactor (HRW), transfer fuel or heavy water to the reactor site, and not test additional fuel, construct additional fuel assemblies for the reactor, or install remaining components, not to engage in reprocessing plutonium or construct a facility capable of reprocessing. The deal also imposes a much more intrusive monitoring regime on Iran's nuclear program, including: Daily (as opposed to weekly) inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at Natanz and Fordow. IAEA inspections of centrifuge production and assembly facilities and uranium mines and mills. Tehran will make early declaration and information of all new nuclear facilities, provide long-requested design information about the Arak reactor to the IAEA and the conclusion of an IAEA safeguards approach for the reactor. Colin H. Kahl, "A Good Deal in Geneva", *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2013, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/11/25/a_good_deal_in_geneva ; "Iran Nuclear Deal Framework 'agreed' in Vienne", *BBC News Middle East*, 20 February, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26269092>.

⁴⁰ For example, "in a television interview to mark his first 100 days in power, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani revealed that when he took office, his government was struggling to pay civil servants because the previous administration had emptied the treasury. In that November 2013 broadcast, Mr Rouhani also said that supplies of basic foodstuffs were alarmingly low, with one province having reserves of wheat for only three days", "Nuclear Deals Keep Iran's Floundering Economy Afloat", *BBC News Middle East*, 22 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25849900>.

removal of sanctions strangling Iranian economy will be a big relief for Iran. Put differently, the economy will not get worse, if not better.

When looking closely, the deal provides the first meaningful constraints on Iran's nuclear program in more than a decade and buys six months by halting additional nuclear progress. It, at the same time, precludes Iran from using further talks to creep closer to a bomb. Another sensitive issue is related to Iranians' "inalienable right" under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium right. Throughout the talks, the Obama Administration has not acknowledged that Iran or any other country has the right to enrich uranium because the United States does not believe that the NPT contains an explicit right to enrichment. A senior administration official explained on November 24, 2013, that, although the comprehensive solution does envision a possible Iranian enrichment program, "the United States has not recognized a right to enrich for the Iranian government. The document does not say anything about recognizing a right to enrich uranium."⁴¹

In a nut shell, according to many analysts, the deal puts Iran further away from a nuclear bomb than it is today, lengthens Iran's nuclear "breakout" timeline (the time required to produce weapons-grade uranium), puts the breaks on the plutonium track, makes it much more difficult for Iran to construct a parallel, covert nuclear infrastructure.⁴² However, all those advantages of the deal are far from convincing many circles including some members of the US Congress on the ground that the Geneva deal fails to completely suspend Iranian enrichment as demanded by multiple U.N. Security Council resolution.

Most important of all, some critics believe that the sanctions relief agreed to in Geneva is risky because it will probably undermine the psychology of fear that currently drives investors and companies away from Iran. This, according to many, will be an economic "windfall" for Tehran and a substantial weakening of sanctions efficacy. Indeed, given the fact that Iran ranks second in the world in terms of natural gas reserves and fourth in terms of oil reserves, with a huge market of 76 million people, it is very open that the sanctions relief will contribute to Iranian economy to a large extent. The rush of many delegations from foreign countries including the Turkish one to seek for new business commitments has been quite explanatory for the immediate positive impact of sanctions relief on Iranian economy. For example, "Chinese state-owned Zhuhai Zhenrong Corporation, an affiliate of China's defense authorities, started negotiations with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) for a new crude oil contract in December 2013. France, which

⁴¹ "Background Briefing By Senior Administration Officials On First Step Agreement On Iran's Nuclear Program," 24 November, 2013 cited in Kenneth Katzman, Pul K. Kerr, "Interim Agreement on Iran's Nuclear program, Congressional Research Service", 11 December 2013, p.9.

⁴² Colin H. Kahl, "A Good Deal in Geneva".

opposed the interim agreement on November 9, even dispatched over 100 businessmen in January 2014.”⁴³

From Tehran’s perspective, the deal, in Rouhani’s words, “means the surrender of the big powers before the great Iranian nation”.⁴⁴ However, the other side of the coin is that the Geneva Interim Agreement has become a focus of growing domestic controversy in Iran between the conservatives and Revolutionary Guard on one side, and President Hassan Rouhani, the nuclear negotiating team, and those considered the reformist camp on the other. The harsh criticism among the parliamentarians in Iranian Majlis is also noteworthy with respect to understanding that the Geneva Agreement is generally seen by many in Iran as giving concession to the United States. In addition, the transfer of the nuclear portfolio from the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has been seen as a blow to the nuclear efforts of Iran.⁴⁵

With the Geneva Agreement, the Obama administration wanted to prove that the United States is a global power seeking for cooperation in dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue. In his speech to the 2014 graduating class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, Obama emphasized that with the Geneva Agreement, Washington showed its willingness to act in situations that are of “global concern” in a multilateral way. He stated: “We must do so because collective action in these circumstances is more likely to succeed, more likely to be sustained, and less likely to lead to costly mistakes.”

Looking from a different angle, however, multilateralism of the Obama administration has not engendered yet a fertile ground for inducing wide international compliance on a full compromise with Iran over nuclear issue. The main concern of US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia is that Washington has not been able to transform the Islamic Republic of Iran into a reliable and responsible state actor on nuclear issue. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even called the interim agreement as “a historical failure.” From Israeli perspective, with the Geneva Agreement, for the first time, the international community recognizes Iran’s enrichment program and agrees that it will not be rolled back. As Netanyahu stated in Knesset, the only result of the

⁴³ Mari Nukii, “New Power Struggles after the Geneva Interim Agreement on the Iranian Nuclear Program”, Association of Japanese of Institutes of Japanese Strategic Studies, 19 March 2014. http://www2.jiia.or.jp/en_commentary/201403/19-1.html.

⁴⁴ “Iran nuclear deal means ‘surrender’ for western powers, says Rouhani”, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/14/iran-nuclear-deal-surrender-western-powers-rouhani>

⁴⁵ Michael Segall, “Internal Iranian Struggle in the Aftermath Geneva Nuclear Agreement”, *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 14 January 2014, <http://jcpa.org/article/the-internal-iranian-struggle-in-the-aftermath-of-the-geneva-nuclear-agreement/>

agreement should be the dismantling of Iran's military nuclear capability since Iranian leaders are committed to destroy Israel.⁴⁶

In a similar vein, the interim agreement has had a big repercussion on the Persian Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman which have generally been aligned with the United States to contain Tehran's influence. Although not reflected in their public statements, as Katzman and Kerr note, "Gulf officials have been quite uneasy about a "double standard" in which Iran would be allowed to continue enriching uranium, whereas the United States insists that civilian nuclear programs in the Gulf, such as that in UAE, not include indigenous production of nuclear fuel."⁴⁷

When it comes to Saudi Arabia, the first reaction of Riyadh is quite positive due to several reasons. First of all, the Saudis and Iranians share some common goals such as demanding peaceful but not too strong Iraq. In addition, despite their diverging interests in Syrian civil war, both sides doubt about the reliability of the United States in different degrees. However, because Iran's nuclear aspirations set Saudi Arabia's alarm bells and it emerges as an existential threat not only by becoming a potential nuclear capable country but also "representing a potential watershed in the political consciousness of the Shia population in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province,"⁴⁸ all those common goals and threat perceptions are flouted by Riyadh. President Obama calls the interim Geneva Agreement a "new path" toward a different world. The future consequences of the deal will be evident as time expires in the end of the sixth month. But one thing is certain, the US current allies such as the Gulf states, Israel and even Turkey fearing that they will be marginalized in the region, will be more enthusiastic to have nuclear capability in the future.⁴⁹

Concluding Remarks

The US top officials numerously stated their concern about the probability of Iran's becoming an armed nuclear power. For example, President George W. Bush declared that "the US will not tolerate construction of a nuclear weapon in Iran and later warned that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons could put the Middle East under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust."⁵⁰ During his

⁴⁶ <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Iran/Pages/Israeli-statements-on-Geneva-talks-with-Iran.aspx>

⁴⁷ Kenneth Katzman, Pul K. Kerr, "Interim Agreement on Iran's Nuclear program".

⁴⁸ Flynt Leverett, "Reengaging Riyadh, The Road Ahead Middle East Policy in the Bush Administration's Second Term" in Flynt Leverett (ed.), (The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 2005), p. 100.

⁴⁹ Former US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft told the Wall Street Journal, "I believe we are at atipping point. If we fail in Iran, we are going to have a number of countries go the same route Iran has just in self-defense. Egypt will, Saudi Arabia will, Turkey will". Peter Spiegel, "Obama Puts Arms Control at Core of New Strategy", *Wall Street journal*, 15 July 2009.

⁵⁰ David Sanger, "Bush says US will not tolerate building of nuclear arms by Iran", *New York Times*, 19 June 2003 cited in Ido Oren, "Why has the United States not Bombed Iran? The Domestic Politics of America's Response to Iran's Nuclear Programme", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.24,

presidential campaign Obama stated that “we can not allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon. It would be a game changer in the region,”⁵¹ Obama’s Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton declared that “a nuclear armed Iran is unacceptable.”⁵² The above-mentioned US foreign policy makers also have made repeated declarations that “the military option is still on the table.” However both during the Bush period and Obama’s presidency, the United States abstained from attacking Iran and preferred to continue its sanction policy. This policy, according to Oren, has been applied despite “the public opinion polls suggesting that the American public is hardly averse to preventive military action against Iran.”⁵³

Many analysts made different explanations on why Washington has abstained from a military attack on Iran so far, however, the most inclusive one is related to the decline of US primacy in the international system. Put differently, as some international theorists allege, unipolar world is over. The unipolar world is devolving a three tiered system. There is the resurgence of other powers such as China, Russia who have started to have the capability of counterbalancing the United States, the rest of the world and the United States who still sees itself as responsible for the preservation of the liberal international order.⁵⁴

The US foreign policy towards the Middle East during the Obama period reflects the ambivalence of the United States in a changing international order that is both being recommitted to American exceptionalism and emphasizing American leadership while acting like a straw man. Obama does not favor overreach in foreign policy so as to justify the US blocking itself from being sucked into the military conflict in Syria. He also emphasizes the US choice of diplomacy over military power in dealing with the Iranian nuclear program. Obama’s words in his address at West Point’s commencement ceremonies reflect the above-mentioned dilemma. “We will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it – when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger.” But we are not going to invade every country that harbors terrorists, nor necessarily rush in to every crisis. We’re going to enlist partners, and work through international institutions.”⁵⁵

No.4, 2011, p. 660.

⁵¹ “The second presidential debate: a transcript”, New York Times, 7 October 2008 cited in Oren, p. 660.

⁵² “US wants Iran sanctions that will bite, Clinton tells AIPAC”, *Haaretz*, 22 March 2010 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/u-s-wants-iran-sanctions-that-will-bite-clintontells-aipac-1.265171>, cited in Oren, 660.

⁵³ Ido Oren, “Why has the United States not Bombed Iran?...”, p. 663.

⁵⁴ Stanley A. Renshon, *National Security in the Obama Administration, Reassessing the Bush Doctrine*, (New York, Routledge, 2010), p. 200.

⁵⁵ “Obama Signals Reset of US Foreign Policy”, *Independent European Daily Express*, 29 May 2014, <http://>

Obama's foreign policy is defined as "both interventionist and internationalist, but not isolationist or unilateral. In other words, not too hot, not too cold—just right".⁵⁶ When looking closely, Obama has been criticized on the ground that his policy to pursue a global war on terrorism seem to stumble from interventionist (Libya) to internationalist (Syria) to isolationist (Bahrain) to unilateral (Israel) all at once in the Middle East. When it comes to US attitude towards Iranian nuclear issue under Obama, it "shifts away from the centrality of great power politics and nuclear rivalry with Russia and China in US policy, towards a greater focus on rogue state and terrorist nuclear threats"⁵⁷

Long story short, if there is one single word which defines current US foreign policy towards the Middle East, it is "withdrawal" or "leading from behind" which, according to many, is defined as America's being left behind.⁵⁸ While Obama honestly believes his interim deal with Iran has stopped Tehran's nuclear weapons program in its tracks, Ayatollah Khamenei has declared that "the activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the field of nuclear research and development won't be halted at all." It is very apparent that Obama has put an end to a war-laden chapter for the US in dealing with Iranian nuclear issue. However, the lack of clear idea about the next chapter makes it difficult to make prediction about an explicit solution to the nuclear issue between Iran and the United States.

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⁵⁶ Bob Dreyfuss, "Obama's Goldilocks Foreign Policy", *Middle East Online*, 28 May 2014, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=66219>

⁵⁷ Andrew Futter, "The United States after unipolarity...", p. 13.

⁵⁸ K. T. Macfarland, "Ukraine, Syria, Iran -- America isn't leading from behind, it's being left behind", *Fox News*, February, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/02/28/ukraine-syria-iran-america-isnt-leading-from-behind-it-being-left-behind/>

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