

Obama's Mideast Dreaming

Many commentators, including me, have reposed our hopes for avoidance of a complete fiasco with Iran over nuclear weapons in somehow fumbling through to the inauguration of a more purposeful U.S. administration on January 20, 2017. As policy, this is little better than common-or-garden irresolution. But with the administration in Washington in the hands of a president and his entourage that appear almost actively to believe that a nuclear-armed Iran would redress unfair historic imbalances in the Muslim world, there is little choice. No sane person at this stage could attach a jot of credence to the president's continuing claims that everything is "on the table," that sanctions could be reimposed, or that Iran will not be frisky because the U.S., as he explained to Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* a couple of weeks ago, has 20 times as great a defense budget as Iran.

To quote the informal and unattributable words of a prominent Arab diplomat recently: "We always suspected that the United States would sell us out to Iran, but we thought we had a safety net with Israel. The Americans, we thought, would not sell Israel out, but now we see that they are selling us all out together." The Iranians will retain enough centrifuges and easily re-enrichable nuclear material within their own borders (contrary to the longstanding demands of the other negotiating powers) to move to a full nuclear capability quite quickly. Inspections will be at prefixed dates, enabling Iran to move and disguise its nuclear development activity, or endlessly to dispute violations of the agreement as they please. No serious observer believes that any agreement based on the recent Geneva protocol will accomplish more than giving Iran a choice of cheating its way, undetected, into the status of a nuclear power at its pleasure, or waiting for the passage of ten years and achieving that status in complete conformity with this agreement.

The Geneva agreement is, in sum, completely inconsistent with the endlessly stated previous American, British, and French statements of determination to prevent a nuclear Iran. Arab and Israeli complaints of a sellout are perfectly justified. Assumedly, President Obama will tell his visitors from the skeptical Arab world at Camp David next month that if they do not get on board with his permissive waiver of the Iranians' steep progress to a nuclear military capability, he will be less enthused about arming all of them with sophisticated anti-missile defenses. (All but Kuwait and Qatar have now canceled, including King Salman of Saudi Arabia.). It is logically impossible to conclude that Mr. Obama and his advisers, and the British and French leaders as well, do not realize that they are effectively gambling that Iran will either 1) bask in the prestige of having faced down what for the last 500 years have been known as the great powers or 2) having made its point, benignly resist the temptation of escalating tensions by rubbing the noses of those powers in the consequences of their own lassitude.

It is understandable that after the serial debacles of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and their sequels, including the disintegration of the democratic Iraq founded by the United States into fragments dominated by Iran and the Islamic State, there is little stomach for further military confrontation. Unfortunately, the evolution of the declared policy of the Western leaders has been so cynically accommodative of the militant theocracy in Tehran that it is hard to believe that the U.S. president does not think that, in accepting it into the nuclear club, he is taking a step toward international political justice and stability. Obviously, trying to impute motives to President Obama will not accomplish anything, but it is rare and disconcerting to be unable to find any reasonable purpose or excuse for the conduct of the world's most important countries in such a vital matter of international security. It is even a mystery why the Chinese and Russians, for all their unlimited capacity for mischief

and contrariety, are so sanguine about welcoming Iran to the nuclear club.

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This immense and disquieting mystery of the endless appeasement of Iran is compounded by what seems to be a seismic shift in the West's attitude to Israel. There is a gathering momentum behind imposing a Palestinian resolution based on the 1967 borders and the destruction or handing over to the Palestinians of all subsequent Israeli settlements in what would then be Palestinian territory. The United States would certainly be able to put such a measure through the Security Council, but Israel cannot survive the return of millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, and if that right were to come back to the Palestinian entity, it would not necessarily satisfy the Arabs and would still provoke the greatest crisis in the history of the State of Israel. If Israel's government simply refused the terms, which would more reflect the biases of outsiders than the correlation of forces on the ground, it would have to live with a virtual outlaw status in the world. Europe would doubtless jubilantly impose sanctions, even as it simultaneously happily withdrew them from the Iranians. But it is almost impossible to conceive that the people and Congress of the United States would attempt an economic boycott of Israel, to punish it for resistance to such an arrangement.

I cannot avoid a ghastly, sinking feeling that President Obama believes that, in this combination of initiatives and results, he would be Israel's greatest friend by permanently placating the hostile Muslim powers, and thereby vastly increasing Israel's national security, while sharply reducing Iranian motivation to attaining nuclear military status. He informally

acknowledges his desire to bring Iran into the company of responsible states, and could believe that he could end the Arab–Israeli and Arab–Persian conflicts, undercut Muslim religious extremism decisively, be the greatest peacekeeper in the Middle East since Alexander the Great, and incidentally propel himself onto Mount Rushmore.

If this is the president's goal, it would be churlish not to credit him, at least, with a vast vision and a sophisticated methodology of deception and single-minded devotion to his objective. If, as also seems possible, he could simultaneously bring the Swiss cheese of an Iran nuclear agreement to a signing, and present to the Security Council for a rubber-stamp vote the terms that have been generally demanded of Israel since the 1967 war, and resolve the right of return, no one could say that the Arabs would not go along with it. This would especially be the case if the Iranians, for once, have the intelligence to sound moderate and placatory, and to avoid their customary threats to exterminate Israel.

The existence of this possibility must provide some incentive for the government of Israel to steal a march on developing events by suggesting to the Arab powers that it will attack the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for Saudi, Egyptian, Turkish, and Pakistani support in an Israeli-Palestinian agreement more generous to Israel. This would presumably revive the suggestions from the Clinton, Saudi, and Taba proposals of 2000–01 for a narrower West Bank, a deeper Gaza, a connection between them making an autonomous Palestine, and general recognition by the Muslim powers of Israel as a Jewish state within those borders.

It is a challenge to faith and belief to imagine that this pell-mell tumbling of events, without any discernible credible leadership from the countries and officials from whom the world would normally expect it, will lead to a resolution of these terribly intractable problems. I may be taking unfair liberties in guessing at Obama's objectives, and it is not

clear that the scenario sketched out here would actually be a solution, or is even capable of being attempted. But while no one seems to have any purchase on the rush of events, it is possible that the Israeli, Saudi, and Egyptian governments are capable of trying to avoid what they would consider the chimera of the Obama plan by implementing some policy of their own.

After my [comments](#) last month on the British election, I believe I owe readers a further word in its aftermath. What has occurred is the best of all alternatives: The Conservatives won a narrow majority by devouring their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats; the Scottish Nationalists have destroyed the Labour party's stranglehold on Scotland; the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP) has forced Prime Minister Cameron to take a more robust position on Europe while still remaining in the EU; and the whole country has taken a long step back toward a two-party system, center right and center left. Labour's effort to go back to pre-Blair days and Cameron's effort to go back to pre-Thatcher days have both failed. Cameron can blame his waffling on most issues except the economy on the Lib Dems and start again in more robust form. Three party leaders and probably two parties have been eliminated. Alarm about Scotland is nonsense: Scottish independence was scarcely raised in the campaign, and the Scottish Nationalist vote was up only slightly. But the opposition in Scotland, instead of being a monolithic anti-independence vote as it was in the referendum, was divided among five parties in the election. Mayor Boris Johnson of London remains the man to watch, and will probably be entrusted with negotiating a better status for Britain in Europe. The United Kingdom has had a lucky bounce, which is not unprecedented.

Such an event in the Middle East would be, but it is the original land of miracles.

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