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Iran Review > Analysis



Is Obama Really Concerned about Iran?

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Following the recent nuclear understanding between Iran and the P5+1 group in the Swiss city of Lausanne, perhaps one may easily claim that a major topic of discussions about security of the region has been what some Arab countries in the Middle East and Israel call “the Iran threat.” Such a view is based on a one-dimensional analysis according to which revocation of sanctions against Iran, which can terminate the country’s international political isolation, will embolden officials in Tehran and make them follow a more aggressive foreign policy approach. This viewpoint is considered one-dimensional in that it totally ignores the role played by internationally recognized norms in shaping international relations.



The US President Barack Obama’s administration has organized an unprecedented event to be attended by heads of regional Arab states, including the king of Saudi Arabia. The two-day event is expected to be held on May 14-15, 2015, at the White House and Camp David, during which the participants will discuss major security concerns of the United States’ allies and will explore ways of fighting off regional threats, especially Iran’s increasing influence in the Middle East. The main question, however, is whether Obama and his administration, as conventional guarantors of security in the Middle East, are really concerned about the Middle East, or Iran is just an excuse used by the United States to give assurances to its allies with regard to various security issues?

In reality, emergence of new global powers like China and India and gradual fall of such conventional powers as Europe, has been changing geopolitical gravitational centers of the world, as a result of which, strategic priorities of the United States have been also changing. Many realist theorists in the United States, including Stephen M. Walt, who attach great importance to the principle of the “balance of powers” in the world, have emphasized that the United States should focus its power and attention on emerging powers, so as not to lag behind the distribution of power in global equations, and continue to play its pivotal role in shaping the world order.

On the other hand, discovery of huge reserves of shale oil and gas in the United States during recent years has greatly relieved the country from its need to the Middle East energy resources.

The third point that should be discussed here is that due to the escalation of insecurity in the Middle East and South Asia as a result of the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the civil war in Syria, emergence of the so-called Islamic State group, and the crisis in Yemen, the region has practically turned into a “quagmire.” Therefore, presence and profound intervention in this region can cost very dearly for any international power or player. As a result, it will not be illogical to say that the large-scale strategy followed by the United States at the present time and perhaps in long-term future – which is also a smart strategy – is to stay clear of this quagmire by literally getting rid of the Middle East. It goes without saying that this strategy will gain more weight and legitimacy through resolution of Iran’s nuclear issue. Perhaps, the unprecedented interest that Obama has been showing in the resolution of Iran’s nuclear crisis is due to his eagerness to advance this large-scale policy.

The problem, however, is that American leaders cannot easily and explicitly talk to their allies in the Middle East about this strategy. These allies have been depending on the United States for their security for many decades and may find discontinuation of that dependence difficult and even daunting. This is where presenting the Iran

factor as a permanent threat gains importance as it binds the United States to fulfilling its obligations toward regional countries and serves as a justified excuse to give reassurances to those countries. On the other hand, securitization of Iran issue and presenting it as a “threat” helps the West, especially the United States, continue with the profitable policy of extensive sales of weapons to its Middle Eastern allies, thus, maintaining prosperity of Western defense industries.

At any rate, both regional Arab states and Israel have found about this reality and reached the conclusion that regardless of whether Iran is or is not a threat, the United States' strategic priorities have changed and shifted to other regions of the world, including Asia-Pacific, Eurasia, and the Arctic region. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Israel insists more than any time before on its threat to launch unilateral military action against Iran and this is why Saudi Arabia has, for the first time, taken the initiative in the region and has embarked on military intervention in Yemen independent of the United States. In the meantime, rationality in foreign policy requires independent actors like Iran to resist the temptation for filling the void of other big powers in the region, and avoid falling in the costly quagmire that the United States is leaving behind.

Key Words: Iran, P5+1, President Barack Obama, Middle East, Israel, Camp David, Arab States, Balance of Powers, Yemen, Iran's Nuclear Issue, Behravesht

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