

Obama, the Senate and the psychology of appeasement

Counsels of prudence and restraint may become the prime agents of mortal danger. A view from Europe

By Matthias Küntzel

There is a majority of the U.S. Senate that supports a bill to strengthen the American negotiating position towards Iran by threatening further sanctions if Tehran violates the Geneva Agreement or flinches the planned final accord on its nuclear program. 75 prominent foreign policy advisers and publicists supported this bill in an Open Letter to leading members of the Congress.¹

There is, on the other hand, the U.S. president who threatens to veto this bill. He is supported by influential senators such as Dianne Feinstein, by the National Iranian American Council, a pro-Iran lobby group, and by grassroots organizations such as the Jewish organization JStreet. Their campaigns build on the war-weariness of the American population. The JStreet-Sticker bears the slogan: "No Iranian bomb. NO NEW WAR. No to Senate Bill 1881."²

Tehran has longed for this division since months. "If we think that there is a unified voice in America, we are mistaken," maintained Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. "By utilizing the opposing views in the U.S. we can be the winners in the (diplomatic) scene." President Rohani's consultants came to the same conclusion. They recommended "to enhance the influence and power of political

¹ Michael Warren, Foreign Policy Experts to congressional Leaders: Enforce Iranian Compliance With Nuclear Deal, in: The Weekly Standard, January 9, 2014. You can find a draft of the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act here: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/F?c113:1:/temp/~c113ylxHG:e1377> . It „supports continued negotiations, gives the administration a year of flexibility to secure a comprehensive agreement, respects the sanctions relief Iran is set to receive and prevents any new sanctions from taking effect while good-faith negotiations are underway“, maintains Senator Menendez, one of its authors. Robert Menendez, A diplomatic insurance policy against Iran, in: Washington Post, January 10, 2014.

² <https://twitter.com/jstreetdotorg/status/421347216679137281>; the draft carries the number 1881.

forces in Washington that ... believe that the U.S. current policy of pressure against Iran should be abandoned."³

The most important force who believes that the pressure should be abandoned, at least temporarily, is the President. While the Senate majority assumes that Iran will change its nuclear policies only under pressure, Mr. Obama maintains that the absence of pressure is necessary for the diplomatic path to prevail.

Why Mr. Obama came to this belief is unclear. He himself gives the possibility of a final agreement with Iran a chance of just 50 percent.⁴ In addition, Tehran's announcements and activities since the signing of the Geneva Agreement of November 24 make clear that those who rely on voluntary Iranian concessions are lost.

After the entry into force of this agreement, Tehran's efforts to complete the plutonium breeder of Arak will also continue as the operating of a new generation of centrifuges "for research purposes". On 20 December, the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency even announced that it wants to make Iran a uranium enrichment center for the whole of Western Asia⁵, while the Office of the Supreme Leader maintained that the six-month period of the Interim Agreement is meaningless: A final nuclear deal could "require even 20 years of bargaining time."⁶

On January 14, President Rouhani put Tehran's attitude in a nutshell: "Do you know what the Geneva agreement is? It means the superpower's surrender to the great Iranian nation."⁷

This is proof that a voluntary concession of Iran cannot be expected.

³ Hassan Dai, Zarif says Iran can defeat US and Israel, November 2, 2013, auf: <http://www.iranian-americans.com/zarif-says-iran-can-defeat-us-and-israel/> .

⁴ <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2013/12/20131207288605.html#axzz2q6c8g8TK> , p. 11.

⁵ Head of AEOL: Iran's vision – becoming a uranium enrichment centre in west Asia; heavy water reactor in Arak will continue to operate at full power, in: Iran Daily Brief, December 20, 2013.

⁶ Amir Taheri, Iran nuke deal quietly collapses, New York Post, December 16, 2013.

⁷ Iranian President Rohani: "The Geneva Agreement ... Means The Superpower's Surrender To The Great Iranian Nation", in: MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 5601, January 14, 2014.

Instead, the threat of non-military and military pressure seems to be a prerequisite for an acceptable outcome of the negotiations.

But why is the public anger of the President not directed against the troublemakers in Tehran but instead against those American lawmakers who do not want to become humiliated by Iran but prove with their bill what Senator Robert Menendez called a "reasonable pragmatism"?⁸

At first glance, a threat from Tehran seems to have triggered the president's conduct. "The entire deal is dead," claimed Foreign Minister Zarif after being asked what would happen if Congress adopts the bill.⁹ Is a comment from Tehran able to restrict the United States Congress' freedom of action?

In reality, Obama lost the ability to drive Iran. Instead, he seems to be impelled by the Mullahs. Tehran feels free to leave the negotiating table at any time. This gives it the ability to blackmail. Mr. Zarif entered the stage already with a threat: "The only way you can ensure that Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful", he maintained in September 2013, "is by allowing it to take place in an acceptable peaceful international environment."¹⁰

The American president seems to have capitulated to this blackmail. He acts as if it is he who needs that "peaceful environment" more than anyone else. Thus, a tendency to appease Tehran is gaining ground inside the White House.

Outside, however, as well: The campaign of JStreet, which mobilized against the new sanctions law with the slogan "NO NEW WAR" recalls the mood and the propaganda of the Thirties in Europe, when,

⁸ Robert Menendez, A diplomatic insurance policy against Iran, in: Washington Post, January 10, 2014.

⁹ Iran's Zarif says nuclear deal dead if U.S. passes new sanctions, www.reuters.com, December 9, 2013.

¹⁰ FM Javad Zarif interview to Press TV: all options are not on the table; Iran cannot be deprived of its nuclear rights, in: Iran Daily Brief, September 12, 2013.

in the words of Winston S. Churchill, the “councils of prudence and restraint” became “the prime agents of mortal danger.”¹¹

It would be nice, of course, to live in a world in which the means of war are no longer needed. It is irresponsible, however, to act as if this is already the case.

During the Thirties "the [British] government ... steadfastly closed their eyes and ears to the disquieting symptoms in Europe," wrote Churchill, who was one of the very few British politicians who had read *Mein Kampf*.¹² Churchill drew attention to the Nazi's "philosophy of blood-lust" and the fact that the internal situation in Germany "bore no resemblance to those of a civilized state."¹³ "Only very silly people, of whom there are extremely large numbers in every country, could ignore all this," he stated in his memoirs.¹⁴ He remained, as we know, alone with his realism and his warning of a major war.

Today, people seem to want to repeat yesterday's ignorance. Khamenei's Iran is not Hitler's Germany. It is, though, the world's only country whose highest representative publicly admires Holocaust denier Roger Gaurody.¹⁵ It is the only country to compare Israelis with "beasts" because they "can not be called human beings".¹⁶ It is the only country whose leader names the United States a "Satan" that maintains its wickedness even "if the enemy is forced to retreat."¹⁷

¹¹ Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm. The Second World War, Volume I*, Harmondsworth (Penguin Books Ltd.) 1985, p. 16.

¹² Churchill, op. cit., p. 64.

¹³ Churchill, op. cit., p.77 and 91.

¹⁴ Churchill, op. cit, p. 163.

¹⁵ Joshua Levitt, Ayatollah Khamenei Tweets Support for French Anti-Semite, in: *the algemeiner*, December 17, 2013.

¹⁶ Raphael Ahren, Israel "unpleasantly surprised" by mild US reaction to Khamenei's vicious speech, in: *The Times of Israel*, November 21, 2013.

¹⁷ Khamenei: „One of the nuclear negotiations blessings was that the American hostility towards Iran, iranians, and Islam became clear to everyone“, in: *Iran Daily Brief*, January 10, 2014.

Tehran makes no effort to hide its goals. It is the Western world that “steadfastly close their eyes and ears.”

One of the differences between the Thirties and the present concerns nuclear fission. Who abandons oneself to the temptation of appeasement accepts not only the risk of a conventional but of a nuclear war. Who would expect a fanatically religious martyr’s regime to refrain from a nuclear bomb without using it?

Those, who succeed in shaking off the psyche of appeasement and judge Washington’s battle for the bill from the distance do recognize how harmful Obama’s attacks against the Senators are – harmful not only for the United States, but for the West and the world.

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