

Obama threatens Iran

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At a White House briefing Wednesday, President Obama personally joined the growing chorus of war threats against Iran coming from Washington and its allies.

Recent threats include remarks from US Defense Secretary Gates, who argued against “another war in the Middle East” in 2008, but stated last month that the US does “not accept the idea of Iran having nuclear weapons.” Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said it was “still time for sanctions,” but that “at a certain point, we should realize that sanctions cannot work.”

It was against this backdrop that the White House called in selected journalists for a press briefing on Iran. They reportedly discovered only after arriving that the “briefer” at this apparently routine event was none other than the president himself.

Obama’s purpose was to deliver a blunt warning to the Iranian government: it could either surrender to US demands that it abandon its nuclear program, or face US attack.

Obama said that Iranian officials “should know what they can say ‘yes’ to.” If “national pride” drove Iran to develop nuclear weapons, Obama continued, “they will bear the costs of that.” He said “all options” were open, in order to “prevent a nuclear arms race in the region and to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran.”

Fearing that certain journalists had misunderstood Obama’s empty phrases about diplomacy as indicating plans for new negotiations with Iran, senior White House officials later spoke to one of the reporters there, well-known pro-war journalist, Robert Kagan, to set the record straight.

In a *Washington Post* column, Kagan criticized journalists who asked US officials about diplomacy with Iran: “This put the officials in an awkward position: they didn’t want to say flat out that the administration was not pursuing a new diplomatic initiative, because this might suggest that the

administration was not interested in diplomacy at all.”

Kagan commented, “As one bemused senior official later remarked to me, if the point of the briefing had been diplomacy, then the administration would have brought its top negotiators to the meeting, instead of all the people in charge of putting the squeeze on Iran.”

In fact, the Obama administration’s policy has never been to negotiate with Iran, but to present Tehran with a list of humiliating, nonnegotiable demands. These were presented in the context of a two-track policy: a campaign of sanctions and war threats could either lead to Tehran’s capitulation, or lay the basis for US military action.

Last June, the Obama administration unsuccessfully tried to arrange a pro-US regime in Tehran, by overturning Ahmadinejad’s election. The US tacitly backed the so-called “Green Revolution,” led by defeated candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and billionaire tycoon Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and supported by sections of the middle class in Iran. However, Washington was thwarted when these forces, drawn from the wealthier layers of Iranian society, failed to gain broader support.

The administration still believes that some form of internal “regime change” may be possible. Kagan noted that White House officials hoped that the political forces behind the Green Revolution could connect with recent strikes of merchants in the bazaars, and the combination “would pose a real threat to the regime.”

However, the Obama administration now seems increasingly set on war as the only way of securing its policy interests in the region. It considers that a US victory in the standoff with Iran is now critical to maintaining Washington’s prestige and hegemonic role in world affairs.

A report by Obama administration advisors at the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) notes that “American credibility...would be seriously diminished if, after

repeatedly issuing warnings to the contrary, it permitted Tehran to cross the nuclear threshold,” that is, to acquire nuclear weapons. It finds that the US must be prepared for “extraordinary action” to preserve its credibility as the world’s greatest military power, and calls for “visible, credible preparations for a military option.”

The US campaign against Iran’s nuclear program is a political fraud. Washington has mounted no such campaign against nuclear-armed India, because it views the Indian army as a US strategic asset in the region. In the case of Iran—seen by Washington as a strategic adversary—the country’s nuclear industry, which Iran insists is only for energy, becomes a pretext for a US campaign to isolate and beat it into submission.

It is virtually impossible for the Iranian regime to demonstrate that the US should not treat it as a threat, short of total political self-emasculation. Iran has ties to political and military forces in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip; it is a major supplier of oil and gas to world markets, including to key US competitors such as China; and it has developed a significant nuclear program.

To get a lasting deal with Washington, Iran would have to publicly renounce supporting parties or resistance movements in regions oppressed by the US or Israel, grant US firms access or control of its oil fields, and submit to invasive controls of its nuclear program. This would amount to a public declaration by the Iranian government that it is a lackey of American imperialism.

As suspicions grow that Tehran may not make such an offer, views are hardening in Washington in favor of war. There are even calls for a press campaign to soften up public opinion for war. The BPC report called for “public discussion of military options,” while the French newspaper *Le Monde* recently asked whether the public might be “psychologically prepared for the scenario of war with Iran.”

US threats, issued in an unannounced meeting covered by a handful of reporters, underscore the Obama administration’s contempt for public opinion. Elected as a result of mass opposition to the Bush administration’s policy of aggressive war, Obama now threatens to start a war that would dwarf the Iraq and Afghan conflicts and threaten to engulf the entire region.

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