

Obama reads Iran better than his critics



Edward Luce

Those whom the gods will destroy they first make mad. Critics of [Barack Obama's Iran deal](#) have been giving a good impression of having lost the plot. An Israeli cabinet minister described it as “one of the darkest days in world history”. Republicans liken Mr Obama to Neville Chamberlain. All agree that a deal that removes about two-thirds of Iran's nuclear capability and freezes the rest will somehow hasten the day it has the bomb. In the next two months, before Capitol Hill votes on it, we will hear a lot more such bombast. It comes down to whether [Congress](#) believes Iran is capable of acting rationally or whether it is a uniquely malevolent country that has outfoxed America and its partners in the negotiating chamber.

The chances are that Mr Obama's deal will prevail. He needs the veto-proof support of just a third of each chamber — 34 senators and 145 in the House of Representatives. Even then, however, it is no sure bet. In the next 60 days it will face the onslaught of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and every Republican presidential hopeful. In addition to viewing [Iran](#) in an apocalyptic light, each has further motives for wishing to sink the deal.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the logic is simple. Iran is Saudi Arabia's chief competitor that claims to speak for the region's Shia minority, a large chunk of which lives in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich east. In a sectarian zero-sum game, anything that boosts Iran is bad.

[Israel's opposition](#) is also straightforward. As the region's only nuclear weapons state — albeit an undeclared one — it wants to keep its monopoly. The fact that the deal would set back Iran's breakout capacity from two months to a year is false comfort, say the Israelis. By bringing a pariah state in from the cold, it will perversely raise the chances Iran eventually goes nuclear.

Finally, Republicans see Mr Obama as a feckless president who is jeopardising US power simply by talking to a terrorist state. The quality of the deal is irrelevant. Nothing short of regime change will do. Some of these motives overlap. For example, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, shares the Republican party's personal animus towards Mr Obama. What unites them is a refusal to see Iran as capable of change.

Mr Obama has taken the opposite tack. A realistic negotiator puts himself into his adversary's shoes. The starting point on Iran is that its desire to go nuclear is entirely rational. US-led coalitions have invaded two of Iran's direct neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan in the past 15 years. American troops are still there. As a rule, the US does not invade countries that have nuclear weapons. Moreover, the US labelled Iran part of the “axis of evil” in 2002, at a time when Tehran wanted to help the US in Afghanistan, where they shared enmity with the Taliban (as they still do). Mohammad

Khatami, the moderate cleric who was then Iran's president, had also signalled a nuclear deal was possible. Had President George W Bush responded, a far better one would have been available. Instead, he branded Iran evil. Unsurprisingly, Tehran stepped up its clandestine efforts.

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Second, Iran's decision to mothball its nuclear ambitions in exchange for economic relief is also rational. It is unlikely to give up on it lightly. It followed a decade's worth of US-led sanctions that has brought the country's economy to its knees. The regime of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader, clearly thinks it will help its chances of survival.

It is possible, as Mr Obama's critics predict, that Iran will spend much of the estimated \$100bn in unfrozen assets on regional proxies — Hizbollah at the forefront. So what? Compared to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis) and its mimics, Hizbollah is a restrained actor. Its theology is absolutist and it has carried out terrorist attacks. But it is not a death cult. In a world of bad choices, boosting Hizbollah's clout is an acceptable price to pay for a deal that delays — and possibly dispels — the spectre of a Middle East nuclear arms race.

None of this cuts much ice with Mr Obama's critics. Yet his detractors offer no realistic alternatives. Many Republican candidates are promising to rescind the Iran deal on "day one" of their presidency. Diplomatic norms prevent Mr Obama from pointing out that Iran is a more promising candidate for peaceful change than Saudi Arabia. Unlike that country, Iran has a quasi-democracy. About [half of its university graduates](#) are female. There are competing power centres within Iran's theological regime. Prospects for further relaxation are easy to imagine. By contrast, the House of Saud rests on brittle foundations. Who dares guess what would come after it? Iran is a natural counterbalance to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi theocracy. As a non-Arab country, it is incapable of dominating the Middle East. There is also the small matter of how to defeat Isis. Without Iran's help, the US would be in far worse straits.

There are moments when US presidents take risks that alter the world as we know it. Ronald Reagan's friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev is one instance. Richard Nixon's opening to China is another. Mr Obama's deal with Iran is almost as breathtaking in its scope.

It is quite possible that it will fail. But if it unravels it should be because of Iran, not Congress. It would be a self-inflicted defeat for the US to torpedo its most significant act of diplomacy in a generation.

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