

Why Did Iran Diplomacy Work this Time Around?¹

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ABSTRACT *In May 2010, Turkey and Brazil surprised the world when they succeeded in getting Iran's acceptance for a nuclear swap deal. To Turkey and Brazil's surprise, their diplomatic victory was rejected by the Barack Obama administration. Washington miscalculated the diplomatic skills of Brazil and Turkey and their ability to take on diplomatic challenges usually reserved for the great powers. Fastforward three years, and suddenly diplomacy with Iran was embraced by Washington. Why did the same American administration that rejected the Turkish brokered deal in 2010, shift in favor of diplomacy in 2013? This essay sheds light on some of the factors that rendered the nuclear standoff with Iran ripe for a diplomatic solution.*

In 2010, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his Brazilian counterpart, Lula da Silva, scored a major diplomatic victory. After 18 hours of marathon negotiations, Turkey and Brazil succeeded in getting Iran's acceptance for a nuclear swap deal. Only 8 months earlier, the same government in Tehran had rejected a similar deal in negotiations with the U.S., Russia and France. But to Turkey and Brazil's surprise, their diplomatic victory was rejected by the Barack Obama administration. Three years later, the U.S. and Iran were back at the negotiating table and this time, a historic interim deal was reached.

But why did diplomacy succeed in

2013? Why did the same American administration, that rejected the Turkish brokered deal in 2010, shift in favor of diplomacy in 2013? This essay will shed light on some of the factors that rendered the nuclear standoff with Iran ripe for a diplomatic solution.

Erdoğan and Lula's Brief Moment of Triumph

In May 2010, the Obama administration was finally on the verge of passing a UN Security Council resolution sanctioning Iran's nuclear activities. But at the last moment, Washington miscalculated the diplomatic skills

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of two up-and-coming states – Brazil and Turkey – and their desire to demonstrate their ability to take on diplomatic challenges usually reserved for the great powers. Erdoğan and Lula proved that it was wrong to assume that diplomacy with Iran was pointless.

On May 15, 2010, Lula da Silva traveled to Iran with an entourage of some three hundred Brazilian businessmen. Soon thereafter, Erdoğan and his energetic Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, joined Lula in an effort to convince Iran to ship out its low-enriched uranium (LEU). Two days later, Lula and Erdoğan stunned the U.S. and the world – they had a deal.

Contrary to expectations, and arguably to the hopes of some, they succeeded in convincing the Iranian government to agree to a deal based on the American benchmarks, where 1,200 kilograms of Iranian LEU would be sent out in one shipment and Iran would receive fuel pads for its Tehran Research Reactor roughly twelve months later. For a moment, it looked as if diplomacy had succeeded after all. But what could have been viewed as a diplomatic breakthrough – with Iran blinking first and succumbing to American demands – was instead treated as an effort to sabotage the new and higher objective of imposing sanctions.

Publicly, the Obama administration emphasized that sanctions were not inevitable; Iran could choose to accept Washington's offer. "Iran contin-

ues to have a choice," said Susan Rice, America's top diplomat at the UN. If Turkey and Brazil's efforts failed and Iran continued to refuse the offer, however, sanctions should follow. "Assuming it continues to make the wrong choices, that pressure will intensify," she declared.

Lula and Erdoğan's frustration with the public statements emanating from Washington stemmed from the contradiction between those statements and their private conversations with American decision makers. In addition, Lula and Erdoğan had a letter from Obama that spelled out the benchmarks of a deal that the U.S. believed would be helpful. The letter was dated April 20, 2010, exactly a week after Lula and Erdoğan's conversation with Obama at the nuclear summit in Washington.

Obama clarified that the purpose of the swap was "for both sides to gain trust and confidence." He spelled out the important markers that any agreement would have to meet to be acceptable to the United States. "For us, Iran's agreement to transfer 1,200kg of Iran's LEU out of the country would build confidence and reduce regional tensions by substantially reducing Iran's LEU stockpile. I want to underscore that this element is of fundamental importance for the United States," the letter said. Obama also presented a compromise mechanism that the U.S. had floated back in November 2009 – the idea that Iranian LEU could be held in Turkey in "escrow" until the fuel was delivered to Iran.

In 2010, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his Brazilian counterpart, Lula da Silva, scored a major diplomatic victory

The letter spelled out three substantive points related to the question of quantity (1,200 kilograms), timing (shipped out immediately, with the fuel rods delivered a year later), and place (an escrow in Turkey). The letter also included a formal point that Iran should send its reply to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in writing within seven days rather than to any individual state.²⁴

Tehran Yields

The discussions in Tehran were exasperating. However, Iran made a concession toward the end of the first day of talks: it expressed a willingness to escrow its LEU in Turkey. Once this point had been confirmed, Erdoğan decided to join the talks and flew in from Ankara around midnight on May 15. Furthermore, as the parties were ready to break for the day, another hopeful sign emerged: the Iranians wanted to resume the discussions at 7:00 a.m. the next day. For Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, this was “the first time I felt there was a good prospect” because

“only someone who is serious schedules a meeting for seven o’clock in the morning.”

By the end of the second day of talks, an agreement was within reach. The Turks and Brazilians had succeeded in convincing Iran to hand over 1,200 kilograms of LEU in one shipment in order to receive fuel pads for its research reactor within the next twelve months – the same parameters Tehran had rejected eight months earlier in Vienna. The LEU, however, would not go to Russia or France. Instead, it would be put in Turkey under the IAEA’s seal and if the West violated the terms of the agreement, Iran could take its LEU back. This arrangement, Turkey and Brazil reasoned, would alleviate Iran’s fear of undue exposure while putting the bulk of its trust in its neighbor, Turkey, rather than its adversary, Washington. Against all odds, Turkey and Brazil, in a few months of intensive diplomacy, had achieved what Western powers had failed to do in several years.²⁸

Shortly after the agreement was struck, the three states held a press conference in Tehran announcing the breakthrough. The mood was jubilant and a picture of Lula, Erdoğan, and Ahmadinejad jointly raising their hands in a victorious gesture immediately went viral over the Internet. Davutoğlu called the fuel swap deal a “historic turning point,” and Erdoğan and Lula both declared that the world no longer needed to consider further sanctions against Iran. Amorim proudly announced that the agreement accomplished all



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan raise their hands together after the Islamic republic inked a nuclear fuel swap deal in Tehran on May 17, 2010.

AFP / Atta Kenare

of the main objectives of the P5+1 and urged those countries to study it carefully.

Obama Choses Sanctions Over Diplomacy

Enthusiasm for the deal never spread to Washington. Unbeknownst to Turkey and Brazil, the Obama administration had secured final approval for a sanctions resolution from Russia and China only a day before the talks in Tehran began. Two days after the deal was struck, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sounded the death

knell for the deal in prepared remarks to the Senate, where she declared that an agreement on a sanctions resolution at the UN had been reached. The choice of venue was not a coincidence. Between instituting sanctions and getting one bomb's worth of LEU out of Iran, Washington had chosen the former. "We have reached agreement on a strong draft with the cooperation of both Russia and China," Clinton told a Senate committee. "We plan to circulate that draft resolution to the entire Security Council today. And let me say, Mr. Chairman, I think this announcement is as convincing an answer to the efforts un-

dertaken in Tehran over the last few days as any we could provide.”

That same day, Obama met with thirty-seven Jewish Democratic members of Congress for an hour and a half to assure them of his commitment to sanctions. A week later, Clinton raised the rhetorical volume even further, claiming that Turkey and Brazil’s efforts had made “the world more dangerous.”³²

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Washington was surprised by Turkey and Brazil’s success. They were expected to fail and, in doing so, be forced to join the P5+1 in pushing for sanctions. At a White House meeting a week before Lula’s trip to Tehran, an Obama administration official raised the question of “What if Iran agrees?” However, the likelihood was deemed so low that the issue was dismissed and no further discussions preparing the U.S. for that scenario were held.

There were numerous reasons why Obama rejected Turkey and Brazil’s successful mediation. First, diplomacy with America’s political foes was a critical component of Obama’s

foreign policy platform during the presidential campaign. Recognizing the political risk that diplomacy with Iran would entail, the Obama team hedged its bets by arguing that the mere attempt at diplomacy would make it easier to mobilize international backing for sanctions if diplomacy failed. With its diplomatic outreach having done just that, the administration felt that it had to at least deliver on sanctions in order to justify the gamble on diplomacy.

Second, the heavy investment in the sanctions process helped turn the matter into one of prestige. Not imposing sanctions would have been hailed as a victory by Iran and condemned by Israel and its allies in the U.S. as a sign of Obama’s weakness and indecisiveness.

Third, moving forward with sanctions in a swift manner was necessary in order to sustain consensus among the P5+1, and ensure that the various deals and concessions that had been made to secure the sanctions would be upheld. These agreements, primarily between the U.S. and Russia, were not so much subject to the Iranian nuclear file as they were a rubric for U.S.-Russian relations and Washington’s reset with Moscow. They were contingent upon Russian support for a sanctions resolution. If sanctions were sidelined by diplomacy, not only could the deals be jeopardized, but, in case the Tehran Declaration fell apart down the road, the sanctions process would start anew and all the deals and arrangements would have to be renegotiated.

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Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the Obama administration believed it had simply run out of political space domestically to accept the Tehran Declaration. Congress was coming at the Obama administration like a steamroller and the White House did not believe that investing capital in expanding the political space for the deal would be a politically wise move. The political maneuverability that Obama enjoyed on Iran when he first took office had been completely eaten away by pressure from Israel and Congress, the fallout from the June 2009 Iranian presidential election, and Iran's refusal to accept the Russian-American swap proposal in October 2009.

Obama had essentially made two promises: one to Brazil and Turkey through his letter to their leaders, and one to Congress that they would get their sanctions on Iran. Once Turkey and Brazil unexpectedly reached a deal with Iran, Obama had to either break his promise to Brazil and Turkey or to the U.S. Congress. With only six months until mid-term elections, he was not going to antagonize Congress. Therefore, he decided to reject Brazil and Turkey instead.

"The impression, right or wrong, that was created was that we could not take yes for an answer," a former senior Obama administration official told me. "That was not what I would call a triumph of public diplomacy."

Tide Turns in Favor of Diplomacy

Four years after the debacle over the Tehran Declaration, Obama has found renewed determination for diplomacy and has even accepted the considerable domestic political cost for pursuing it. How did this stunning turnaround come about?

There are several reasons that made the resolution of this conflict ripe and the key parties' political commitment to diplomacy sufficient. First, there has been a significant geopolitical shift in the region that simply rendered the continuation of the U.S.-Iran enmity too costly. Regionally, the strategic interest of the U.S. and two of its key allies in the region – Israel and Saudi Arabia – have been diverging on several important fronts: Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Arab uprisings. Washington seeks a nuclear accord with Tehran to avoid both a nuclear Iran and war with Iran. The Saudis and Israelis, on the other hand, fear that any improvement of relations between Tehran and Washington will legitimize Iran's role in the region and increase its influence at their expense.

On the regional balance of power, Martin Kramer, a fellow at the conservative Israeli Shalem Center,

points out the main issue of contention: The American belief that the regional status quo is unsustainable; the Arab populations are rising and America's Middle East strategy has to adjust to this reality instead of continuing to back pliant Arab dictators. Kramer disagrees: "In Israel, we are for the status quo. Not only do we believe the status quo is sustainable, we think it's the job of the U.S. to sustain it." On this issue, the Saudis and Israelis tend to agree. An Arab official who was briefed on talks between President Obama and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud told the *New York Times* that the Saudi monarch was unwavering in his opposition to the largely Shia pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. "King Abdullah has been clear that Saudi Arabia will never allow Shia rule in Bahrain - never."

Second, the domestic political landscape in Washington has changed so that the key vested interests opposing a U.S.-Iran deal are no longer decisive. In fact, the powerful and hawkish pro-Israeli lobby's defeats are rare and seldom public. However, in the last year, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has suffered three major public setbacks. AIPAC's first defeat was over the nomination of Senator Chuck Hagel for Secretary of Defense. In spite of a major campaign defaming Hagel, even accusing him of anti-Semitism, his nomination won approval in the Senate.

Then AIPAC lost the battle in Congress to approve President Barack

Obama's push for military action against Syria. AIPAC announced that it would send hundreds of citizen lobbyists to the Hill to help secure approval for the authorization of the use of force. Nevertheless, AIPAC and Obama were met with stiff resistance. The American people quickly mobilized and ferociously opposed the idea of yet another war in the Middle East. By some accounts, AIPAC failed to secure the support of a single member of Congress.

The third defeat was over new sanctions against Iran. The interim nuclear agreement from November of last year explicitly stated that no additional sanctions could be imposed. Yet, AIPAC pushed for new sanctions, arguing that it would enhance America's negotiating position. The White House strongly disagreed, fearing that new sanctions would cause the collapse of diplomacy and make America look like the intransigent party. The international coalition the president had carefully put together against Iran would fall apart, and the U.S. and Iran would once again find themselves on a path towards military confrontation.

However, AIPAC insisted. Its immense lobbying activities secured 59 cosponsors for the bill, including 16 Democrats. But AIPAC couldn't move beyond 59 cosponsors and never managed to get the bill to the floor. Supporters of diplomacy put up an impressive defense of the negotiations, building both off of years of careful development of a pro-diplomacy constituency and coalition

machinery as well as the grassroots muscle of more recent additions to the pro-diplomacy camp.

Eventually, AIPAC threw in the towel and announced that it would no longer push for a vote on the bill. The powerful lobby's defeat was historic, public and humiliating. The very same forces that Obama did not dare challenge in 2010 were now defeated by his administration.

The shifting political landscape in Washington was also seen in the debacle over Syria. As Obama sought support from Congress for an attack on Syria in August 2013, the public ferociously resisted, flooding Congress with phone calls. The most credible threat that was issued throughout this episode was not Obama's threat to bomb Syria, but the American people's threat to vote out members of Congress if they supported the war. Their threats proved effective.

This dramatically changed the landscape because it showed that the politically safe position was not to be hawkish and pro-war, but to be skeptical of military action and favorable towards diplomacy.

The third factor that has enabled the current diplomatic breakthrough is the president's ability to muster enough political strength and will to pursue diplomacy, regardless of the

domestic political price that might be inflicted on him.

"Tough talk and bluster may be the easy thing to do politically, but it's not the right thing for our security," he said a day after the deal had been struck. Once Rouhani was elected and the White House concluded that he was serious and committed to diplomacy, the U.S. president mustered the same dedication. He did so partly because it was the right thing to do for U.S. national security, but also because Iran is now – paradoxically – the lowest hanging fruit in the Middle East. There is no other issue in the Middle East that has as high of a likelihood of being solved. With Iran, unlike Syria, Egypt and elsewhere in the region, the U.S. president had a good chance of making a difference.

If the parties reach a final, comprehensive deal, this will undoubtedly be a game-changer in the region. However, it will also come about to some extent because both the region and the political dynamics in Washington have already changed. Unfortunately for Erdoğan and Lula, they were ahead of their time. ■

Endnote

1. This article is an adaptation of the following writings by Trita Parsi: *A Single Roll of the Dice – Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (Yale University Press, 2012), ch. 10. "Going to Tehran", *Al Jazeera*, November 28, 2014. "The Illusion of AIPAC's Invincibility", *Huffington Post*, February 8, 2014.