



Desperate And Dumb

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Last month, President Barack Obama reportedly wrote a private letter to Iran's supreme leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, seeking to tie the fight against the Islamic State group to the ongoing negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. The White House purportedly sought to pressure Iran into reaching an agreement by the November 24 diplomatic deadline by hinting that failing to do so would affect American efforts against the Islamic State group.

It's no wonder the White House tried to keep the letter a secret; this is a terrible deal.

Look at it from Tehran's point of view. Iran has been reluctant to reach an agreement that would limit its nuclear program. The Islamic Republic has resisted both carrots and sticks. The White House now wants to link the nuclear issue to the ongoing struggle against the jihadist group's Sunni insurgency, presumably believing that the Islamic State group poses enough of a threat to Shiite Iran and the Iraqi government to compel movement on the nuclear front. This also supposes that the Iranians think that U.S. involvement in the fight against the Islamic State group is necessary and beneficial.

Neither assumption makes much sense. Yes, the Shiite Islamic Republic intensely opposes the Sunni Islamic State group and its pretensions to leadership of the Muslim world. But Iran does not see the group as an existential challenge; it does not threaten Iran's territorial integrity, and from Tehran's point of view, it poses a manageable danger to Baghdad. Iran will not compromise its long cherished strategic nuclear goals for momentary assistance against a guerrilla band with delusions of grandeur.

So it's not surprising that a recent article by Sadollah Zarei in the Iranian newspaper Kayhan, reprinted on Khamenei's personal website, argued that the Iraqi Army has already been successful in checking the Islamic State group's advances because of Iran's backing. The United States and its coalition partners, on the other hand, have not been effective in their air campaign against the jihadist group. If the United States played a greater role in the Iraqi effort, it would mean American commanders overriding more knowledgeable Iraqi officers, blaming them in case of failure but taking credit for success. And since the Iraqis are already doing well, who really benefits from a larger American presence? Zarei implies that the deal is a way for Washington to trick Tehran into sanctioning the reintroduction of a substantial American troop presence in Iraq, something Iran naturally opposes.

By Zarei's analysis, the deal makes no sense because it is a win-win for Washington. In exchange for limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions, the United States gets to intervene more deeply in Iraq. How does Iran benefit?

In fact the proposal communicates White House desperation, both to reach a nuclear deal by November 24 and to beat back the Islamic State group. The fact that Obama chose to keep it secret also signals weakness – if he was making a reasonable proposal that he thought he had the political muscle to defend, he would have announced it in a major foreign policy address. Instead, the White House has played into the perception that the president is a weak leader who has to rely on diplomatic stunts instead of cool-headed strategy at the end of his presidency.

Perhaps Obama believed that a personal approach would have more weight than a public proposal, that it would emphasize his sincerity. But there is no reason to believe that Khamenei holds Obama in any great esteem or that reaching out this way would persuade him. Zarei noted that previous personal appeals from Obama were followed by harsh rhetoric and economic sanctions. He ends his article with a quote from Khamenei: "Iran does not trust America. Underneath their velvet gloves, they have hidden iron hands."

Attempting to link the war against the Islamic State group to the Iranian nuclear talks is not in American interests either. It would complicate decision-making on what are almost entirely separate issues. It would restrict Washington's freedom of action to respond to developments on both fronts. The secret letter may indicate that the White House is so determined to reach an agreement by November 24 that it would accept a bad agreement over none at all.

This is certainly not Iran's position, however. If it was, they would take Obama's deal.