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Obama administration to run with sheikhs, hunt with Ayatollah

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

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The United States has got off to a bad start in the effort to assuage the hard feelings of its close Middle Eastern allies over the Iran nuclear deal. Not that Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is unqualified to undertake a delicate mission to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Jordan at this point in time.

It is more that Carter's appearance in the region at this juncture gives the wrong signal – for, his visiting card introduces him as America's number one arms salesman.

The purpose of winning the allies over to President Barack Obama's side in the upcoming battle over Congressional approval for the Iran deal could have been better served by deputing his National Security Adviser as special envoy to undertake the diplomatic mission.



Ashton Carter

To cap it, even if it was Carter's intention to ingratiate himself with the Israeli and Saudi leadership, Carter made a *faux pas* by insisting that the best part about the Iran nuclear deal is that it does not preclude the "military option", which, he claimed, the US is constantly upgrading and finessing.

That was an appalling remark to have been made. One, Carter was lying and he knew he was lying and we all know he knew he was lying. The US simply cannot afford the high cost of an attack on Iran — a cost in hundreds of American lives.

Two, Carter needlessly put the US at odds with the world community just twenty-four hours before the United Nations Security Council and the European Union were scheduled to approve the Iran nuclear deal as a first step towards lifting sanctions against Tehran in a move that is perfectly timed to help the Obama administration by sending a signal that they hope the US Congress will follow.

Three, Carter's belligerence creates bad blood with Tehran, while, on the other hand, not appeasing Israel or Saudi Arabia, either. Neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia believes that the US has any intentions of attacking Iran through the Obama presidency. The US' credibility has further suffered in the eyes of the allies when it negotiates a nuclear deal with Iran in the teeth of their objection and then immediately thereafter speaks about a military option.

But, more fundamentally, another issue arises here – namely, that Carter's visit is principally aimed at updating the US' well-established Middle Eastern strategy, which is to sell weapons to America's allies on the pretext of an Iranian threat. The plain truth is that Tehran has no intentions to launch aggression against Israel or Saudi Arabia, whose militaries are more than a match to Iran's.

With regard to Saudi Arabia, in particular, Carter's mission actually promotes an assertive Saudi Arabia that has emerged after the Arab Spring, which no longer regards war as taboo as an instrument of policy. Starting from the Saudi intervention in Bahrain, Saudis have begun pursuing a muscular foreign policy, one that is, ironically, independent of the US security umbrella. Chas Freeman, a former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said recently that it is not merely a Saudi defiance of American guidance that we are talking about; but, Riyadh "actually takes some pleasure in asserting independence."

On the contrary, the Iran deal may hold the potential to open a new door to resolving the regional issues. That potential, howsoever small, deserves to be explored. The key to exploring it lies in forging a regional security mechanism that is inclusive, which includes Iran. Creating military barriers or fueling an arms race is not the right approach needed under the circumstances if the US is sincere about regional stability.

Suffice it to say, in reality, Carter's mission to Saudi Arabia – to be followed up shortly by Secretary of State John Kerry next month – becomes a diabolical attempt to get the Sheikhs of the Persian Gulf to foot the huge bill for the deployment of the US missile defence system in the Persian Gulf, which they have been reluctant to do, since they know they really don't need it.

Washington seems over-anxious that if some sort of reconciliation follows in the downstream of the Iran nuclear deal between Tehran and the GCC capitals, the window of opportunity to get the

ABM system deployed in the Persian Gulf might get shut forever. Carter's mission aims to preempt such an eventuality.

Does it mean that the US has no intentions to work with Iran on the regional issues? Far from it. The US wants to string its traditional allies along and make them underwrite the cost of deployment of its global ABM system in the Persian Gulf, while of course also engaging Iran.