

The Iranian Nuclear Deal: Long-Term Implications for the Middle East

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ABSTRACT *The Iran nuclear deal has the potential to become a game changer in the Middle East by providing the opportunity for rapprochement between Iran, the preeminent power in the Gulf, and the United States, the preeminent global power, thus reducing the strategic importance of both Saudi Arabia and Israel. Israel's virulent opposition to the deal has also demonstrated that it has become a strategic liability for the United States.*

It is now certain that the agreement between Iran and the P5+1 concerning Iran's nuclear program will move to the implementation stage. The attempt by Republicans in the U.S. Congress to scuttle the deal has been defused by a procedural vote in the Senate that precludes that body from repudiating the agreement and thus forcing President Obama to veto the Senate resolution. However, there are still strong forces opposed to the implementation of the agreement, viz. Israel and the Israel lobby in the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the Republican right, that will try their best to derail the deal which they see as the beginning of a rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran –a prospect

that they find highly undesirable for their own different reasons.

The nature of the opposition to the agreement points to the long-term importance of the deal. The nuclear agreement is important above all because it portends a sea-change in the relationship between the United States and Iran –the preeminent global power and the preeminent regional power in the energy-rich Persian Gulf. It was clear to close observers that the controversy regarding the Iranian nuclear program was not so much a consequence of the major powers' attachment to the non-proliferation goal as it was a function of the antagonistic relationship between

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Many of those opposing Turkish accession are strong promoters of an “existential” narrative that presents the EU as an essentially Christianity-based entity

Iran and the United States since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The major nuclear powers’ reaction to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Israel, India and Pakistan bears out this point. Israel, because of its special relationship with the U.S., escaped any negative consequence despite the fact that it has been well-known for at least four decades that it possesses a sophisticated nuclear arsenal and matching delivery capabilities from the land, sea, and air. The only cost to India and Pakistan was the cutting off of dual use technology and material –a handicap that both were able to overcome either through the development of indigenous capacity, as was the case with India or through clandestine procurement as was the case with Pakistan. The type of harsh economic sanctions which Iran faced, affecting such areas as oil sales, banking, and trade, were not even remotely contemplated in the case of Pakistan and India.

The adversarial relationship between the U.S. and Iran was, and continues to be, the independent variable that explains the harsh treatment meted out to Iran. The crucial significance of the nuclear agreement is that it

signals that it is not impossible to reverse the nature of the American-Iranian relationship; in fact, it signals that this may be the right time to do so. It is this indication that has upset Israel and Saudi Arabia because such a rapprochement has the potential to radically change the strategic environment on which Tel Aviv and Riyadh have based their foreign policy calculations for the past several decades. It was remarkably easy for Saudi Arabia and Israel to sell their strategic value to Washington as long as the latter’s relations with Tehran continued to be tense and antagonistic. Their strategic value to the U.S. is likely to diminish as American-Iranian relations improve.

However, looked at from both Washington and Tehran, the improvement of American-Iranian relations is a desirable end in itself. First of all, it has become clear that the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and even Yemen cannot be resolved without their mutual cooperation. Although this is not the declared policy of either government, the U.S. and Iran have already begun to cooperate in shoring up the Iraqi government’s military capabilities vis-à-vis ISIL. While the U.S. has been occupied in conducting air strikes against ISIL targets, training the Iraqi military, and arming anti-ISIL Sunni militias, Iran has been busy supplying and training the Shia militias defending Baghdad and preparing to retake Mosul from the ISIL, and providing arms and training to the Iraqi military. Both Iran and the U.S. have come to define ISIL as the primary threat to their interests in



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Ali Akbar Salehi give a press conference on July 15, 2015, after Iran's nuclear negotiating team struck a deal with world powers in Vienna.

AFP PHOTO / ATTA KENARE

the Fertile Crescent. This explains their informal cooperation against the Islamic State, which is also reminiscent of their informal coordination against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the early years of this century.

The nuclear agreement, by removing the major irritant in American-Iranian relations, is likely to pave the way for more open coordination in their campaign against ISIL. Iran is the only regional power willing to commit ground troops to combat the ISIL. Iran has desisted so far from doing so because it was apprehensive of a hostile American reaction that could negatively impact the ongoing nuclear negotiations. With the nuclear agreement in place, Iran and the U.S. could begin to coordinate their ground and air campaigns respec-

tively to dismantle ISIL capabilities and hopefully end the ISIL menace in the Middle East.

Syria is threatened by ISIL, but is also in the throes of a civil war which antedates the rise of ISIL. This civil war initially pitted the Assad regime against a medley of opposition groups both secular and Islamist. The inability of the Assad regime to crush its opponents and the incapacity of the latter to overthrow the government resulted in a military stalemate that contributed to the collapse of political authority in large parts of the country. The failure of the Syrian state to control portions of the country has had two major consequences. First, by creating a political vacuum, it allowed ISIL to establish itself in parts of the country where the au-

thority of the state no longer existed. Second, it provided an opportunity for external powers to intervene in the Syrian conflict and conduct their proxy wars in Syrian territory by arming and training client groups within the country. Several such proxy wars – Saudi-Iranian, American-Iranian, American-Russian – continue to be fought in Syria, making the country even more ungovernable.

The threat posed by ISIL and the fear of the total collapse of the Syrian state, which is likely to generate an even more severe refugee crisis than the one currently facing the international community, has led to serious rethinking in world capitals including Washington. With this has dawned the realization that no resolution, or even management, of the Syrian conflict is possible without Iranian agreement or at least acquiescence since Iran, along with Russia, is the primary supporter of the Assad regime. The U.S. had resisted Iran's participation in finding a resolution to the Syrian imbroglio to a large extent because of the standoff on the Iranian nuclear program. Now that the agreement has cleared the way for a resolution of the nuclear issue, Washington's reluctance about including Iran in finding a resolution to the Syrian conflict is likely to be greatly reduced if not totally eliminated.

Simultaneously, there are indications that Iran may be rethinking its strategy in Syria and may be ready to accept an outcome that leads to a managed transition of power from the Assad regime to a coalition government

which would include remnants of Assad supporters, if such a coalition could be cobbled together. The feasibility of such an outcome will depend on three factors: first, the elimination of the ISIL threat; second, the ability of the opposition factions to get their act together and form a united front; and, third, the provision of credible assurances to Iran that the post-Assad government will not be anti-Iranian and will not impede Iran's financial and military aid to the Lebanese Hezbollah as long as the latter limits its activities to Lebanese territory.

Therefore, on the whole, the nuclear deal is likely to have a major impact on the politics of the Middle East as far as the Iraqi and Syrian situations are concerned. It is likely to have even more significant consequences for the politics of the energy-rich Persian Gulf region. It is the fear of these consequences that explains the nervousness with which Saudi Arabia and its allies, especially UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain, have perceived the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1.

The agreement radically diminishes Saudi Arabia's strategic importance to the United States. The Saudi kingdom could pose as America's primary strategic asset in the Gulf as long as Washington's relations with Tehran were antagonistic in character. It could do so because the American-Iranian cold war dovetailed into the Saudi-Iranian competition for primacy in the energy-rich Gulf. Adversarial relations between the U.S. and Iran assured Riyadh of Washington's un-

stinting support in all its ventures in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. It also guaranteed Saudi Arabia access to America's top-of-the-line military equipment as long as it could pay for it and as long as Israel did not object to the transfer of particular types of weaponry to Riyadh.

The United States has assured Saudi Arabia in the immediate wake of the nuclear deal that it will continue to supply the kingdom with the most sophisticated military equipment in its arsenal to fend off any Iranian challenge. Nevertheless, the Saudi regime is realistically nervous that Washington may not live up to its commitment in the medium term if the nuclear accord is implemented smoothly. If the process of implementation proceeds relatively smoothly, it could lead to a radical reassessment in Washington of the perceived threat from Iran, thus reducing Saudi clout with the United States and leading it to rethink the issue of weapons transfer to the kingdom. This problem could become especially acute if Saudi Arabia begins to suffer from political instability as it is likely to do in the context of succession struggles within the House of Saud, as power is transferred to the next generation of Saudi princes. An Iran that is on good terms with the U.S. could eventually change the calculations of all major powers interested in the stability of the energy-rich Persian Gulf.

This shift in the region's calculus of power is all the more likely since Iran is undoubtedly the preeminent power of the Persian Gulf whether one bases

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one's conclusion on demography, the educational level of the population, technological advancement, industrial capacity, or the resilience of its elites and its population. All of these factors are reflected in Tehran's unrelenting commitment to "strategic autonomy" –the hallmark of a major regional power– meaning that all decisions relating to Iran's vital interests are taken in Tehran and not imposed by external powers. Iran has paid very high costs in order to protect its strategic autonomy, including the severe economic sanctions imposed upon it since the Islamic Revolution and more particularly since the early years of this century as a retribution for its nuclear program. No other country in the Middle East, or indeed anywhere else, would have been able to sustain its strategic posture in the face of such punishing sanctions. Saudi Arabia, Iran's principal competitor in the Gulf region, would have crumbled in months were it not for the fact that such sanctions had been imposed upon it.

It is Iran's position as the preeminent power in the Gulf that makes it imperative that it be a willing partici-



P5+1 and Iran representative pose prior to the announcement of an agreement on Iran nuclear talks on April 2, 2015 in Lausanne.

AFP PHOTO / FABRICE COFFRINI

part in any structure of security that is constructed in the Persian Gulf. Isolating Iran and building a security structure to contain it rather than include it is bound to fail. It is like creating a security structure in South Asia without India's willing participation. Iran in many ways is the India of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia is its Pakistan –the recalcitrant state unwilling to accept the natural balance of power in the region– except that Saudi Arabia is “Pakistan with oil,” which gives it greater clout in world capitals, and more particularly in Washington.

However, just as a stable structure of security in the Persian Gulf cannot be constructed without the preeminent regional power, Iran, it cannot be built without the participation of the preeminent global power, the United States, because of the stra-

tegic and economic importance of the energy-rich Gulf region to the industrialized powers. It is imperative, therefore, that the United States and Iran cooperate to make the Gulf stable and secure. The nuclear deal paves the way for such cooperation, if not immediately, then within the next five to ten years. The potential for American-Iranian cooperation in the Gulf is probably the most significant outcome of the nuclear agreement; and one that needs to be welcomed by countries in the Middle East and outside.

The country that has been most vocal in its opposition to the nuclear agreement is Israel. The principal reason for Israel's opposition is its fear that the deal opens up the possibility that its nuclear weapons monopoly in the Middle East may be eroded if the Iranian nuclear program is allowed to

proceed. The secondary reason is its apprehension that its strategic clout in Washington may be drastically reduced once American-Iranian rela-

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tions are put on an even keel. The Israeli stance on the Iran nuclear issue is extremely hypocritical even by the amoral standards used to measure the behavior of states in international politics. It is exceptionally ironic to witness the only nuclear weapons power in the Middle East preaching to the rest of the world the terrible consequences that could emanate if Iran went nuclear and insisting that Iran's nuclear program, both civil and military, be totally demolished as part of any agreement with the P5+1.

Israel's maximalist stance on the issue has clearly put it at odds with the United States. President Obama and his team realized early on that compromises had to be made in order to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future. The nuclear agreement resulted from this understanding of the impera-

tive to compromise, which is the essence of diplomacy. What the Israeli position on this issue, especially the attempt by Prime Minister Netanyahu to go above the head of President Obama and appeal directly to the Republican-controlled Congress to reject the nuclear deal, has made very clear is that there is a fundamental disjuncture between American and Israeli positions on the Middle East.

The disconnect in American and Israeli stances on the Iranian nuclear agreement has also made plain that Israel is no longer a strategic asset, if it ever was so, for the United States, but has distinctly become a strategic liability. This has been made amply evident by the campaign on the part of the Israeli lobby in Washington to persuade the U.S. Congress to repudiate the agreement after it was signed. The lobby reportedly spent \$30 million in its effort to reverse the sitting U.S. President's decision to sign the deal with Iran. One hopes that this disjuncture between Israeli and American objectives will lead to the realization in Washington that the United States must no longer pursue an Israel-centric policy toward the Middle East because it is counterproductive from the point of view of securing American interests in the region, which are vastly different from Israeli interests.

If the United States is genuinely interested in preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East it cannot be selective in its condemnation of countries proliferating nuclear weapons. It must throw its weight behind

the objective of establishing a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East, a goal that Iran has embraced but which Israel opposes adamantly. American policy so far has been to scuttle all talk of a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone (MENWFZ) in the periodic Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conferences in order to protect Israel's nuclear monopoly in the region. Hopefully, the negotiations with Iran have convinced policy-makers in Washington that in the long run the only way to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is to work toward the establishment of MENWFZ that applies equally to all countries situated in the region.

The implications of the Iran nuclear agreement for Turkey are expected to be by and large favorable. While there is some concern in Turkey and abroad that Iran may have access to larger funds to support its beleaguered ally Syria and also expand support to its allies in Iraq, including the Shia militias as well as the regime in Baghdad, this need not bring it into direct conflict with Turkey for two reasons. First, Iran will need the unfrozen funds above all to rebuild its derelict economy and meet the pent up demands of its population. Very little will be left over to fund foreign adventures. Second, the Rouhani government is committed to improving relations with its neighbors, above all Turkey, for very pragmatic reasons. Therefore, it is unlikely to escalate tensions with Ankara while it has more important jobs at hand.

On the other hand, the lifting of sanctions on Iran, especially those affecting financial transactions, and the accompanying thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations will free Turkey to do normal business with Tehran. This would mean easier and greater access for Turkey to Iran's gas and oil reserves. It would also mean greater trade, especially the export of manufactured Turkish products, to Iran's large consumer market and easier access for Turkish companies interested in undertaking construction and other projects in Iran. The economic benefits will, therefore, far surpass any increase in tensions on Syria and Iraq, which are likely to be minimal.

Finally, Turkey and Iran are the two pivotal powers in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. The security and stability of the region will depend largely on their mutual relations. Both Ankara and Tehran have expressed a strong desire to keep the relationship on an even keel and, in fact, to see it flourish. Good relations between Iran and Turkey are also essential to reduce external great power intervention in the Middle East for tensions and rivalry between the two pivotal powers provides points of intervention for extra-regional powers. One must not forget that the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry weakened both empires vis-à-vis Russia and the Western powers ultimately leading to the disintegration of the former and serious debilitation of the latter. It is imperative that Ankara and Tehran do not allow this to happen again. ■