

The Iran Nuclear Deal: Rewriting the Middle East Map

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ABSTRACT *Surveying today's Middle Eastern and North African landscape offers few straws of hope. Iran's reemergence producing a potential catalyst for a focus on core domestic political, economic and social issues could be one of those few straws. Whether Iran wittingly or unwittingly plays that role, the Middle East and North Africa are only likely to break their internecine cycle of violence and despair when the alternative becomes too costly. A resolution of the nuclear issue offers Iran far more than the ultimate lifting of crippling international sanctions. It would also allow Iran to capitalize on geostrategic gains it has made despite its international isolation. What worries opponents of the nuclear deal like Israel and Saudi Arabia most is the potential transformation of Iran from a game spoiler into a constructive player.*

A preliminary agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the United States, Britain, China, France and Russia – plus Germany (P5+1), is set to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program and ultimately reintegrate it into the international community. In doing so, it would not only remove the threat of a debilitating war with Iran and prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but also return the Islamic republic to the center stage of the region's geo-politics.

It would force regional powers such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as

Iran, to focus on their most immediate issues, rather than use the Iranian threat as a distraction, while offering the US the opportunity to revert to its stated policy of pivoting from Europe and the Middle East to Asia.

To be sure, a resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue is not a panacea for the vast array of social, political, economic, ethnic, national and sectarian problems in the MENA. Political and social unrest, boiling popular discontent with discredited regimes and identity politics are likely to dominate developments in the region for years to come.

Nonetheless, Iran's return to the in-

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Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and EU Foreign Affairs Representative Catherine Ashton negotiate in Geneva, Switzerland. UN Photo

ternational community is likely to provide the incentive for it to constructively contribute to ending the bitter civil war in Syria, breaking the stalemate in fragile Lebanon where the Shiite militia Hezbollah plays a dominant role, and furthering efforts to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. That would also take some of the sting out of the region's dangerous slide into sectarian Sunni-Shiite conflict. Iran has already moved to demonstrate what change could mean with its talks with the United Arab Emirates over the fate of three disputed Gulf islands and inviting the Gulf States to inspect its nuclear facilities. Such shifts would reduce the number of fires in the MENA that the Obama administration has been

seeking to control and have prevented it from following through on its intended re-focus on Asia.

A resolution of the nuclear issue offers Iran far more than the ultimate lifting of crippling international sanctions. Over the last decade, Iran has been able to effectively counter US policy in MENA through its support of Hezbollah, which is the single most powerful grouping in Lebanon; Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian faction in Gaza; its aid to the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; backing of restive Shiite minorities in the oil-rich Gulf States and Iraq; and ensuring that the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki looks as much toward Tehran as it does to Washington.

Iran's incentive to become more cooperative is the fact that the resolution of the nuclear issue would involve acknowledgement of the Islamic republic as a legitimate regional power and one of seven regional players - alongside Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Pakistan - that have the ability or economic, military and technological strength to project power. It would also allow Iran to capitalize on geostrategic gains it has made despite its international isolation.

Iran is likely to be further motivated by an easing and ultimate lifting of the sanctions that will allow it to address boiling domestic social and economic discontent. President Hassan Rouhani's election earlier this year has for now replaced that powder keg with high expectations that his more moderate policies would ease the heavy economic price Iran was paying for its nuclear program. This is despite many Iranians' sense of disappointment that Iran will reap only US\$7 billion in benefits from the freshly concluded agreement in the coming six months. The \$7 billion serves, however, as an incentive for Iran to come to a comprehensive and final agreement on its nuclear program.

What worries opponents of the nuclear deal like Israel and Saudi Arabia most is the potential transformation of Iran from a game spoiler into a constructive player. The nuclear deal removes the Islamic republic as the foremost perceived threat to the national security of Israel and Saudi Arabia. For Israel, this risks peace with the Palestinians reclaiming its

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position at the top of the agenda, making it more difficult for the Israelis to evade the painful steps needed to end a conflict that is nearing its centennial anniversary.

For Saudi Arabia, it complicates its efforts to deliberately fuel regional sectarianism, deflect calls for equitable treatment of its Shiite minority as well as for greater transparency and accountability, and establish itself as the region's unrivalled leader.

Nowhere is that likely to be more evident than in Iranian policy towards Syria. Contrary to perception and what Saudi Arabia and its allies would like the world to believe, Iranian-Syrian relations are not based on sectarian affinity but on common interests stemming from international isolation. That reality changes as Iran rejoins the international community. A litmus test will be Iran's role in Geneva 2, a second round of talks scheduled for January 22 aimed at ending the brutal Syrian civil war, even if the Islamic republic is denied a seat at the table. US Secretary of State John Kerry kept the door for Iran open, saying its contribution would be

welcome if only from the side lines. Although the UN Secretary General sent an invitation to Iran to be present at the Geneva 2 talks; the invitation was withdrawn at the last minute by the Secretary General.

For the US, a deal means evading at least for now the threat of another Middle East war with potentially catastrophic consequences and enlisting Iran in addressing the region's problems. That creates space for it to focus on long-term goals in Asia.

However, in removing Iran as a regional lightning rod, the US is likely to be forced to clearly define a Middle East policy that balances short-term national security with the reality of years of regional volatility and unrest to come. This instability could redraw some national borders and is likely to involve messy political and social transitions, following the toppling of autocrats in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen in recent years and the civil war in Syria.

In fact, Iran's return to the fold is part of a broader realignment of international relations in the MENA driven by the waves of change gusting across the region. Those waves have fundamentally altered the region's perception of threat, attributing greater significance to domestic rather than external risk, changing expectations of security cooperation with allies and questioning Western propositions of liberalization.

External threats like Iran are blown out of proportion to counter and

discredit domestic opposition. It is a strategy that is faltering. A deal with Iran thwarts what was intended by its detractors to counter and discredit domestic opposition and focus allies like the United States on regional rather than domestic problems that threaten the survival of autocratic regimes.

The Obama administration's failure to embrace that strategy by pursuing rapprochement with the Islamic republic and paying at least lip service to its liberal values could make the US a liability rather than an ally for countries like Saudi Arabia. That should hardly be a surprise. The US and Saudi officials have long conceded that the alliance forged in 1945 between their two countries was one built on common interests rather than common values. Those interests have now begun to diverge.

The US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel sought in December 2012 to narrow the divide by backing flailing Saudi efforts to establish regional hegemony on its side of the Gulf through greater integration of Gulf military capabilities in the framework of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Saudi blueprint aims to effectively establish the kingdom as the region's military superpower and first line of defense, while allowing the US to balance its commitment to the region with its goal of pivoting towards Asia. The problem is that it risks splitting the GCC.

Speaking at a think tank dialogue just a stone's throw away from Bahrain's

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restive Shiite neighborhoods, Hagel made this move on his first visit to the Gulf since the initial agreement in November between the P5+1 and Iran. Hagel handed Riyadh what it wanted: a first step towards a union of the GCC member states with the kingdom as the dominant power.

In doing so, Hagel went beyond seeking to reassure Saudi Arabia and its closest allies within the GCC that the US' rapprochement with Iran would not come at the expense of the energy-rich, fragile Gulf autocracies. The US also wanted to show that it would remain committed to its defense umbrella for the region despite focusing increasingly on Asia.

By laying out a series of steps to put the GCC, in which Saudi Arabia is by far the most powerful member, rather than individual Gulf states at the center of US defense policy, Hagel effectively endorsed Saudi calls for a union of the Gulf States. This is a move that so far has been thwarted by fears among some of its smaller members that they would be swallowed by their big brother. Indeed, the Saudis failed in their initia-

tive in the last year to forge a union with Bahrain, where Saudi and UAE troops have been based to bolster the regime since the brutal squashing of a 2011 popular uprising.

In a rare public statement against Gulf union, Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawi Al Ibrahim, a onetime representative of a separatist movement, confronted his Saudi counterpart, Nizar Bin Obaid Madani, in no uncertain terms. "We absolutely don't support Gulf union. There is no agreement in the region on this If this union materializes, we will deal with it but we will not be a member. Oman's position is very clear. If there are new arrangements for the Gulf to confront existing or future conflicts, Oman will not be part of it," he said.

Al Ibrahim suggested what most Gulf States refuse to acknowledge: the region's major problems were internal rather than external and should be the region's focus. Ahmed al Saadoun, speaker of the Kuwaiti parliament in 2012, rejected a Gulf union while in office, saying that as a democracy Kuwait could not be united with autocratic states.

Barely a hundred meters from where Hagel spoke, police vehicles and machine-gun mounted armored vehicles patrol the perimeter of the Shiite neighborhood of Karbad. Graffiti on its walls reflects the area's mood. Slogans include: 'Down with King Hamad,' 'Martyrdom is our habit,' 'Our goal is toppling the regime,' and 'we bow only in front of God.' A local res-

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Mohammed Javad Zarif receives a warm welcome from his countrymen.

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ident said, “This will never end. It’s gone too far. Reform is the only way out.”

Hagel couched the new US approach in terms of “strategic agility” and “wise deployment of our influence.” The US would help the GCC integrate its missile defense capabilities, he added, by emphasizing the GCC as a “multilateral framework that is the best way to develop an inter-operable and integrated regional missile defense.” This would include missile defense on the agenda of annual meetings of US and Gulf air force commanders and officials; making missile defense, marine security and counterterrorism-related sales to the GCC as a group rather than to individual member states; and instituting an annual US-GCC defense ministers’ conference. Hagel said that the first such confer-

ence should be held in the next six months.

Saudi officials, endorsing Hagel’s proposals, said that the defense secretary had understood the kingdom’s needs and in doing so had supported their effort to achieve a Saudi-led Gulf union. “This fits our agenda perfectly,” stated one official.

Integrating regional defense as a step towards union is likely to prove easier said than done due to more than just political resistance from smaller Gulf States. The GCC has no mechanism to make military purchases despite the signing of a joint security agreement last year. Even if it did, the Gulf States would likely squabble over every detail of the acquisition.

In addition, smaller Gulf States are hesitant to rely on Saudi Arabia for

their defense not only for political reasons, but also because of the kingdom's checkered military record. Saudi Arabia was unable to defend Kuwait against Iraqi invasion in 1990. More recently, Saudi troops had a hard time confronting Houthi rebels on the other side of their border in the north of Yemen.

Similarly, a majority of GCC members do not see their interest continuously aligned with those of Saudi Arabia. Beyond countries like the UAE and Oman refraining from joining plans for a Gulf monetary union, Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum broke ranks with the kingdom in early 2014 by calling for the lifting of sanctions against Iran even before a definite resolution of the nuclear issue. The remarks of Sheikh Mohammed, who also serves as UAE prime minister and vice president, were in stark contrast to UAE attitudes a few years earlier, when the UAE Ambassador to Washington became the first Gulf official to openly call for a military strike against Iran.

For its part, Qatar has sought to develop the soft power needed to compensate for its inability to ensure its security, safety and defense militarily and reduce its dependence on big brother Saudi Arabia by projecting itself through an activist foreign policy, an acclaimed and at times controversial global broadcaster, an airline that has turned it into a transportation hub and a host of mega sporting events.

In doing so, it has demonstrated that size no longer necessarily deter-

mines a state's ability to enhance its influence and power. Its challenge to Saudi Arabia is magnified by the fact that it, alongside the kingdom, is the world's only state that adheres to Wahhabism, an austere interpretation in Islam.

Qatari conservatism is, however, everything but a mirror image of Saudi Arabia's stark way of life with its powerful, conservative clergy, absolute gender segregation, total ban on alco-

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hol and houses of worship for adherents of other religions, and refusal to accommodate alternative lifestyles or religious practices. Qatar's alternative adaptation of Wahhabism coupled with its lack of an indigenous clergy and long-standing relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's only organized opposition force, complicate its relationship with Saudi Arabia and elevate it to a potentially serious threat.

In fact, as Saudi Arabia seeks to inoculate itself against the push for greater freedom, transparency and accountability sweeping the MENA, Qatar poses a major challenge to the kingdom's puritan interpretation of Islam. It is a challenge that is rooted

in historical tensions that go back to Qatari efforts to carve out an identity of its own in the 19th century. It also stems from long-standing differences in religious interpretations that are traceable to Qatar's geography, patterns of trade and history, and a partially deliberate failure to groom a class of popular Muslim legal scholars of its own.

Although long existent, the challenge has never been as stark as it is now, at a time of massive change in the region. The differences are being fought out in Syria and Arab nations like Egypt, who have toppled their autocratic leaders in recent years.

In the process, Qatar has emerged as living proof that Wahhabism, the puritan version of Islam developed by the 18th century preacher, Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, that dictates life in Saudi Arabia since its creation, can be somewhat forward and outward looking rather than repressive and restrictive. It is a testimony that is by definition subversive and is likely to serve as an inspiration for conservative Saudi society that acknowledges its roots but in which various social groups increasingly voice their desire for change.

The subversive nature of Qatar's approach is symbolized by its long-standing, deep-seated ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which faces one of its most serious litmus tests with the ascension of a new emir and a successful Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign that helped topple the elected government of Moham-

med Mursi in Egypt and countered Qatari influence within the Syrian opposition movement.

Iran's return to the international fold would likely serve to crystalize differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Even more importantly, it makes it more difficult for the kingdom to distract attention from its increasingly glaring internal contradictions. The unfolding rebalancing of geopolitical power expressed by Iran's engagement as the MENA enters its fourth year of what is likely to be a long drawn out, tortuous process of change are two sides of the same coin. At the core of this movement of tectonic plates is a battle of inclusiveness versus exclusiveness and acknowledgement that the region's states are multiethnic, multi-religious and multi-tribal entities.

Winning that battle is no mean feat. It means a dramatic shift in mindset that overcomes deep-seated fears - the most irrational of emotions - and seeking solutions to which all, not just a few, are parties. Surveying today's Middle Eastern and North African landscape offers few straws of hope. Iran's reemergence producing a potential catalyst for a focus on core domestic political, economic and social issues could be one of those few straws. Whether Iran wittingly or unwittingly plays that role, the MENA is only likely to break its internecine cycle of violence and despair when the alternative becomes too costly. Until then, it is doomed to remain a cauldron of ever-more bloody conflict. ■