

FRIENDS AND FOES OF A UNITED STATES-IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

The recent U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, though still preliminary, might lead to a reshaping of Gulf geopolitics. Both have much at stake: the U.S. would achieve a major non-proliferation success, Iran would get respite from sanctions and enjoy international recognition. A deal could open up new possibilities for U.S.-Iran cooperation on Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the fight against Al Qaeda. Regional powers such as Turkey and Russia can live with a U.S.-Iran détente, but Israel and Saudi Arabia have good reasons to fear its consequences. The U.S. will have to decide whether pleasing its allies better serves its interest than a deal with Iran.

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Expectations run high that Iran's nuclear standoff might eventually be solved diplomatically after the recent preliminary agreement reached in Geneva by representatives from Iran and the so-called P5+1, a group formed by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. The Geneva deal is predicated on Iran's agreeing to limit its nuclear program in return for a partial sanction relief for a period of six-months, during which the parties will work on a longer-term final arrangement.

Iran's nuclear program has been high on the international security agenda for at least a decade. The United States, Europe, Israel, and a number of Arab countries have accused Iran of secretly pursuing a nuclear weapons program, in contravention of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. Iran has always insisted that its intentions are exclusively peaceful. After years of rocky negotiations, false starts, reciprocal bitter accusations, talks over talks, sanctions, and threats of air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, the new tone set by U.S. President Barack Obama and his Iranian counterpart, the recently elected Hassan Rouhani, seems to have set the stage for a shift in the geopolitics of the Gulf region.

Betting on Change: Supporters of a U.S.-Iran Deal

A U.S.-Iran nuclear deal would have profound repercussions across the whole region, potentially turning the three decades of hostility between the two countries into a more open, constructive relationship that could include *ad hoc* forms of pragmatic cooperation on several issues of mutual concern.

There is no doubt that Iran could greatly benefit from a solution to the nuclear dispute. First and foremost, the lifting of sanctions—particularly those unilaterally imposed by the United States and the European Union—would breathe desperately needed fresh air into Iran's strained economy, most notably by recreating an investment-friendly environment in its lucrative yet underdeveloped energy sector. In addition, a deal would give Tehran's largely isolated clerical leadership a degree of international recognition, which it could use to strengthen its domestic legitimacy (due to the lifting of sanctions), while also facilitating Iran's gradual reintegration into the international community.

Such a *de facto* (if not official) recognition would be pivotal at a time when Iran is anything but pleased with the situations produced by the political upheavals experienced in many Arab countries since early 2011. With Egypt solidly returned to

the hands of the anti-Islamist, anti-Iranian, and Saudi-backed military, ally Bashar al-Assad preoccupied with the brutal Syrian civil war, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas isolated and weakened, and Lebanon's Shiite armed party Hezbollah in trouble for its open support for Assad, an agreement with the United States would give Iran a way out of its regional isolation. In particular, it would give Iran the chance to regain some of the ground lost to its rival Saudi Arabia, which until very recently was the main beneficiary of the chaotic cycle of revolutions, counterrevolutions, and civil strife in which the Arab uprisings seem to be stuck.

The rewards for the United States would be significant too. Defusing the Iranian nuclear crisis, with its potential for escalating into a military confrontation, would greatly reduce the risk of a destabilized Middle East, and free up precious diplomatic resources the United States could utilize in the Asia-Pacific region. A deal could also pave the way for further agreements on

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other critical regional issues. These include Syria's pacification (hardly attainable without involving Iran), the stabilization of an Afghanistan that will soon see the NATO-led mission depart, and keeping together an Iraq fraught with ethnic and sectarian divisions, notably between the pro-U.S. and ever more autonomous Kurds and the ruling, Iranian-backed, Shiite forces in Baghdad. Moreover, an understanding on the nuclear issue could lead to a pragmatic alignment between the United States and Iran in the fight against Al Qaeda, a sworn enemy of both Tehran's "heretic" Shiite ruling elite and Western "crusaders."

The United States and Iran would not be the only beneficiaries from an agreement. The region's populace would be spared the gruesome effects of a potential military confrontation that could easily result in the further radicalization of ethnically or religiously-based political rivalries between Iran's regional supporters and opponents, thereby paving the way to more violence and instability. The global economy, still reeling from the effects of the Great Recession in the West, would avoid the energy hikes that would likely follow a bombing campaign of Iranian nuclear facilities. Especially if the Iranian leadership retaliated by attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the oil traded worldwide is said to transit every day, oil prices would skyrocket. A U.S.-Iran deal would also lend additional life support to the faltering multilateral non-proliferation regime revolving around the NPT. The position of Europeans –most of whom are appalled by the prospects of another

military crisis in the Gulf, genuinely concerned about the endurance of multilateral regimes, and eager to reinvest financial and diplomatic resources in Iran— well epitomizes the stakes the entire international community has in a settlement.

Betting on the Status Quo: Opponents of a U.S.-Iran Deal

Obama and Rouhani are apparently convinced that the advantages to be gained by their countries from a pragmatic understanding of the nuclear issue are worth pursuing, despite deep-rooted American-Iranian hostility. The key to a solution of the dispute lies in the details of an agreement that should allow Obama to credibly claim to have removed the risk of a nuclear-armed Iran and let the Iranians save face by agreeing to an Iran-based, limited, and internationally-monitored capacity to enrich uranium. Uranium enrichment, a complex and costly industrial enterprise, is technically the bone of contention between the P5+1 and Iran, because it can serve both civilian and military ends.

However, the road to a solution of the nuclear standoff is full of obstacles. The challenging task of devising a working scheme that can guarantee that Iran will not resume key nuclear activities undetected will be played out not only on a technical level, but a political one. In fact, the technical details of a deal will only count as much as the various players involved in Iran's nuclear issue agree that they serve their own political interests.

While all such players publicly advocate a diplomatic solution, there are some who fear a deal more than they fear a failure. The usual suspects in this regard are Russia, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. And then there is Turkey, which is a special case in this context.

Russia views the nuclear conundrum over Iran's nuclear program through a strategic lens, and it likes what it currently sees. The Islamic Republic remains far from crossing the nuclear threshold (the Russians have never really thought of Iran's nuclear program as an imminent threat). Yet it also remains shut to any influence from the United States, contrary to the vast majority of Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, which are part of a U.S.-centered system of alliances and partnerships.

In theory, Israel should be the one that is most eager for a settlement of the standoff, given that it has constantly depicted a nuclear-armed Iran in apocalyptic terms and the Islamic Republic as a state run by a mad *clique* of ideologues bent on Israel's annihilation. Yet Israel fears that Obama is aiming a major foreign policy score, and he may consent to an agreement that provides insufficient guarantees that Iran would

not resume military-related nuclear work. In fact, the Israeli government's negative assessment of the deal might well end up to be the case, as Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has set the bar far higher than Obama. Whereas the U.S. President could be ready to sign off on an agreement that keeps Iran from going nuclear (i.e. building a nuclear arsenal) by imposing limits and strict oversight of Iran's nuclear program, Netanyahu's main goal is to reverse the program altogether.

This implies a ban on uranium enrichment, which, coupled with the ability to produce a warhead and the development of a robust ballistic arsenal, could eventually result in an Iranian nuclear breakout capacity, which would enable Iran to build a nuclear warhead in a short timeframe.

Israeli anxieties extend beyond the technical verifiability of the nuclear deal. Deep down, the Israeli government is concerned that a resolution to the nuclear dispute might clear the field for a progressive American-Iranian *rapprochement* that would lend Iran sufficient credit to support an agenda opposed to Israeli interests in the region, and especially in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Saudi Arabia, for its part, has worked intensively on isolating Iran in the last years. Behind the scenes, it has supported an aggressive policy revolving around sanctions and a credible threat of a U.S. military intervention.¹ Saudi Arabia has also attempted to sharpen its profile as a committed supporter of the Palestinian cause, a part Iran found easier to play in the aftermath of the deeply unpopular U.S. invasion of Iraq, to which the Saudi crown acquiesced out of respect for the alliance with Washington. Above all, however, the Saudis have maneuvered to ensure that friendly –or at least acceptable– forces take control of the governments in Arab countries afflicted by revolutions and turmoil. They have done so especially in Egypt, where the Saudi-backed military has checked the Muslim Brotherhood, a fearful ideological challenger to the House of Saud that had flirted with friendlier relations with Iran. But the prize the Saudis coveted the most was the ouster from power of Assad in Syria, where they have been supporting the opposition, including Al Qaeda-leaning radical Sunni groups, with money and arms. Unsurprisingly, the Saudis were aghast when

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¹ According to a WikiLeaks cable, Saudi King Abdullah, speaking of Iran and its nuclear ambitions, urged the United States to “cut off the head of the snake.”

Obama, in September 2013, backtracked on his plan to strike Syria's government forces for having used sarin gas against civilians and instead struck a deal with the Russians for the removal of all Syrian chemical weapons, a deal which in practice has recognized Assad (and his Iranian backers) as an interlocutor.

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Unlike Russia, Israel, or Saudi Arabia, Turkey's position on a prospective deal on Iran's nuclear issue is hard to read. The reason for this difficulty is that for a while Turkey was the regional player most interested in an arrangement. Turkey tried to achieve this –unwisely, without genuine U.S. support– via the ill-fated agreement with Iran that was brokered along with Brazil in May 2010. Following the outbreak of civil

war in Syria, however, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan put Turkey at the forefront of the group of countries strongly lobbying the United States to militarily oust Iran-backed Assad, or at least to give strong military support to the rebels. Even before that, Iran-Turkey relations had suffered from Turkey's agreement to have parts of U.S.-built missile defense facilities –clearly targeted at Iran– installed on its territory.

However, the original calculus at the core of Turkey's now defunct “zero problems with neighbors” policy still retains some strategic sense: in no way would Turkey benefit from further regional destabilization. A U.S.-Iran nuclear deal would help in that regard, even though it could result in a partial marginalization of Turkey on issues ranging from Syria to Iraq or even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given that Obama seems determined to keep U.S. troops out of Syria and is equally wary of taking the side of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, with which Erdoğan's Islam-rooted party has an ideological affinity, Turkey has at the moment few levers to use to shape events. Thus, Turkey might eventually be content with the residual advantages that a U.S.-Iran deal would bring it anyway. Hence it is unlikely that Erdoğan, whatever his personal view of the P5+1-Iran talks, would indulge in playing the spoiler's role.

Russia would probably have fewer scruples to do so. However, the truth is that it has little room –politically and on the ground– to get in the way of a U.S.-Iran deal if the two are determined to reach one. Moreover, as is the case for Turkey, such a deal would not leave Russia fully empty-handed. If a U.S.-Iran *rapprochement* were indeed to follow the settlement of the nuclear dispute, Russia would gain from

U.S.-Iranian efforts to curb extremist Islamism, which has dangerously paired with separatism in its troubled North Caucasian republics.

If Turkey and Russia have few reasons and little capacity to spoil the diplomatic efforts aimed at a nuclear agreement with Iran, then Saudi Arabia and Israel have many cards to play.

Spoiler Alert

Recently, Saudi Arabia has expressed signs of growing frustration, if not outright anger, with the United States because of its perceived indecisiveness on Syria, the Palestinian issue, and above all a potential *détente* with Iran. Riyadh was motivated enough to protest the inability of the UN Security Council to address the Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian

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conflicts by unprecedentedly refusing to take a seat at the body – a rebuke which most have correctly interpreted as being actually aimed at the United States (though it can also be argued that the Saudis do not want to have to cast a vote on a Security Council resolution endorsing a potential P5+1-Iran deal). High-level Saudi officials have been more explicit in their criticism. Former ambassador to Washington, Bandar bin Sultan, went as far as to warn that Saudi Arabia may undertake a “major shift away” from the United States. These are all clear messages to U.S. supporters of the unwritten alliance with the House of Saud that they should oppose any deal that would strengthen Iran’s position in any way.

The other potential spoiler is, of course, Israel. The latter enjoys enormous, bipartisan and almost uncritical support in the U.S. Congress – the body, it is worth recalling, with the power to lift most U.S. sanctions against Iran. Israel can also count on the Republican Party –steadfastly determined to let the Obama presidency fail– to be more inclined to deny the president the major foreign policy success that a deal with Iran would be, or that would at least be presented as such by the Obama administration.

In both cases, U.S. supporters of America’s alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia could urge Obama to demand that Iran abide by conditions so tough as to make it impossible for Rouhani to sell the deal to Iran’s clerical leadership, most notably Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

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The path towards a resolution of the nuclear standoff with Iran is therefore very narrow indeed. Assuming that the Iranian leadership is genuinely interested in an arrangement, Obama will have to present the deal as a substantial contribution to Israel’s security and as non-detrimental to the alliance with Saudi Arabia. At the same time, he will have to agree to ease sanctions to a degree sufficient for Rouhani to claim a diplomatic success without compromising the domestic and international prestige of the Islamic Republic. Obama will have to square the proverbial circle.

Obama’s Job: Make Hard Decisions, Do Not Square the Circle

Obama’s main problem is that squaring the circle is as impossible in international politics as it is in geometry. The U.S. president will have to make hard choices, and be able to pursue them with an eye on the strategies and concerns of both his Iranian counterpart and domestic and foreign opponents of a U.S.-Iran deal. In all probability, the only kind of arrangement deemed acceptable by Israel and Saudi Arabia –as well as by their U.S. supporters– is a punitive deal that puts an end to Iran’s nuclear ambitions without conceding anything substantial. This is hardly a recipe to achieve an agreement with the suspicious Iranians. Obama will have to concede something, particularly on sanctions relief, and this implies that he cannot afford conditioning his Iran policy while wishing to please both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

However counterintuitive as it might seem, dealing with Israel’s resistance might turn out to be easier than dealing with Saudi Arabia’s. Provided the Obama administration manages to negotiate a tough deal with the Iranians that extracts significant concessions (though not as significant as Netanyahu would like) in terms of transparency and international oversight, the Israeli government will find it hard to dismiss the argument that the deal bolsters Israeli security. This argument would resonate with Israeli public opinion. Perhaps more critically, it would strike a chord within Israel’s security and military establishment, which seems to share the Obama administration’s view that, in light of its historical record, the Iranian clerical regime can ultimately be considered a rational actor that is able to behave pragmatically when it suits its interests. As a matter of fact, Iran would have few incentives to cheat on a nuclear deal that has been excruciatingly difficult to achieve, since doing

so would trigger a massive reaction by the United States and its allies, including possibly military means – to which even Russia and China might not object.

As for Saudi Arabia, there is little Obama can do to soothe its concerns other than insisting that the United States remains committed to the bilateral partnership. Only, such a commitment does not stipulate that U.S. strategic objectives in the Gulf ought to dovetail with the Saudi ones, and certainly not that the U.S. policy in the region should be dictated from Riyadh instead of Washington. Obama maintains that he would do his country great harm by venturing into a military campaign in Syria whose end goals and post-intervention strategy are impossible to determine in advance. He also seems persuaded that it is not in the U.S. interest to foment a Gulf “Cold War” between Saudi Arabia and Iran if the latter might be lured into a less confrontational and more pragmatic stance.

If Obama wants a chance to sell what seems to be an extremely delicate nuclear deal with Iran to U.S. regional allies and domestic constituencies, he will have to challenge them to show that their alternative strategy better serves the interest of the United States than his. So far, his administration’s foreign policy has stood for restraint and prudence, two qualities too often neglected in international politics, particularly from a superpower’s standpoint. To achieve the goal of ending Iran’s nuclear threat, however, Obama will have to go beyond prudence and show vision and determination. He has already passed the test of re-election. The test of history lies ahead.