

# The Barriers to Iranian-American Rapprochement: Israel and Saudi Arabia

## PART II

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*Among US clients and allies in the Middle East there are fears that the security of their regimes had been compromised or that the US has secretly sold them off during its bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran. The Saudi-controlled media and its propagandists went into overdrive frantically deriding and lamenting Washington's decision to engage Tehran in direct and public high-level diplomatic dialogue whereas Israeli leaders said that the agreement should be rescinded...*

As a result both the US and Iranian government have sought to reassure some of the different players in the Middle East to calm down.

Washington has had to repeatedly assure Israeli leaders and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regimes about the deal with Iran. US Secretary of State John Kerry has visited Israel several times. Kerry has promised that Tel Aviv will be consulted about the negotiations with Tehran and has re-emphasize that the strategic alliance between the US and Israel is «unbreakable.»

The Iranian government began to reach out to the Arab petro-sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif started visiting Arab capitals in December 2013 for this purpose. He visited Kuwait followed by Oman, then Qatar, and finally the United Arab Emirates, where the head of the UAE was invited to visit Tehran.

Zarif let it be known publicly while he was in Qatar that the goal of his government was to assure the Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf that the interim nuclear agreement between Iran and Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States (the «Permanent/P 5+1» or «EU3+3») was in their best interests. Rouhani's administration even began asserting that it wanted to work with Saudi Arabia and that Riyadh was an important regional player in the Middle East. Zarif was clearly trying to reassure the House of Saud and keep it calm about the steps towards rapprochement that the US and Iran had taken.

### **Al-Saud and Israeli Opposition to Iranian-US Rapprochement**

Even though Saudi Arabia was tied to the terrorist attacks targeting the Iranian Embassy in Beirut and has launched a series of terrorist attacks against Iranian interests across the Middle East, Zarif visited Lebanon in mid-January 2014 and signaled that Tehran was willing to facilitate compromises with the House of Saud and its clients in Lebanon. Just before Zarif's visit to Lebanon, Hezbollah softened its stance on the formation of a new government

in Beirut, giving some leeway to the March 14 Alliance. Saudi Arabia's Lebanese client Saad Hariri announced afterwards that he would return to Lebanon and even form a government that included Hezbollah ministers. Hariri's remarks were followed by an announcement by Lebanese President Michel Sleiman that there no longer existed any obstacles to the formation of a new Lebanese government.

Together with Israel, the Saudi regime is viciously opposed to any rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. In this context, Israel's Arutz 2 (Channel 2) reported that Israeli senior officials held secret meetings with certain senior officials from some of the Arab regimes and that one senior Arab official from the Persian Gulf had visited Israel for coordination work.

*The Jerusalem Post* reported on the Israeli-Saudi alliance too in an article published on September 22, 2013. Michael Oren, Tel Aviv's ambassador to the US, told Herb Keinon that because of Syria and Iran that «there has probably never been a greater confluence of interest between» Israel and the Arab petro-sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf. Oren also explained that Israel had mutual agreements with these Arab regimes not only on Iran and Syria, but also on Egypt and Palestine.

As a result of its fears, Saudi Arabia has tried to assimilate the other Arab petro-sheikhdoms by pushing for the amalgamation of the GCC into a full-fledged union with a united military force. The idea was put forward in 2011 and even earlier, but Saudi fears about the thawing of relations between Tehran and Washington has reinvigorated the House of Saud to pursue the objective much more rapidly.

Not wishing to lose its sovereignty or fall under the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's control and to become embroiled in a Saudi-Israeli regional conflict against Iran, the Sultanate of Oman has politely refused to get involved with Riyadh's plans. Omani officials have said that they will not rock the boat by obstructing the Saudi amalgamation plans for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Instead Oman will withdraw silently from the GCC. On the other hand, the leaders of the United Arab Emirates have been ambivalent about the Saudi idea, whereas the regimes of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar have accepted the plan.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the GCC have made demands to have oversight on the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 to protect their own interests. During a security gathering in Bahrain for the Manama Dialogue, they argued that they should have been consulted on the interim agreement that the P5+1 made with Tehran and even that Saudi Arabia or the entire GCC should have been included in a P5+2 formula. This argument was specifically voiced through Qatar by Doha's Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Attiyah. The aim of the GCC demands to be included in the negotiations with Iran is very clearly aimed at imposing additional demands on Iran, which like the talks in Geneva have nothing to do with the Iranian nuclear program itself.

The foreign-backed sham Syrian National Coalition (SNC) has also involved itself in the interim nuclear agreement. It has been against the sanctions relief that Iran gets under the agreement. The SNC has declared that the deal struck with Iran in Geneva would benefit the Syrian government, because it would allow the Iranians to divert a portion of the amount of money that is scheduled to be unlocked from the over 100 billion dollar frozen Iranian funds to the Syrian government.

## **The Motivations for the Opposition to Iranian-US Rapprochement**

In regards to hostility of some of the regional regimes towards any rapprochement between Iran and the US, it should be remembered that Tehran was once one of Washington's most important and prized allies before the Iranian Revolution. The United States strategically valued Iran much higher than all the other states in the broader Middle East. The regional headquarters of almost all American and Western European companies in the Middle East were almost always located inside Iran. Tehran was even a candidate for consideration into entry into NATO when the alliance was being formed and considered a vital member of the Western Bloc.

It was the monarchy in Iran that would intervene on behalf of the US to protect American allies and clients in the region. Just like how the Saudi Arabian military intervened in Bahrain to keep the undemocratic Bahraini regime in power, the Iranian military intervened in the Sultanate of Oman in the 1970s to keep Oman's absolute monarchy in place against the revolt that started with the Dhofar Rebellion and ultimately intended to create a socialist republic. The US also used Iran to engage the Kurdish peoples because of the ethnic and linguistic links between the peoples of Iran and the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Iran was also the second Muslim country to formally recognize Israel and the Iranians even sent UN peacekeepers to stand between the Israelis and the Arabs.

When the US and Iran cut ties, many of the less important US allies and clients in the region benefited due to the gap or vacuum that was created by the cutting of Iran-US ties. The United Arab Emirates benefited because Dubai was allowed to grow through all the diverted shipping and trade that would have normally gone to Bandar Abbas and other Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf. The energy infrastructure in the rest of the Persian Gulf received more resources for development.

Washington was forced to divert its military support to the Arab petro-sheikhdoms and to place greater weight on its ties with Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. President Saddam Hussein's regime also benefited, albeit temporarily, because Washington's unwavering support for Tehran against Baghdad was gone and the US began looking to Iraq to contain Iranian regional influence.

Many of America's allies that benefited from the dissociation of Washington and Tehran are now fearful that what they gained due to the absence of Iran can be reversed. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel have been startled most of all. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu angrily denounced the interim nuclear agreement as a «historic mistake» when he heard about it. On the other hand, the House of Saud began threatening to do something that it is actually incapable of doing: form its own «independent» foreign policy,

### **Syria and Other Considerations**

All in all, the US sanctions regime against the Iranian economy was barely holding, albeit it was hurting the Iranian economy. India was in the process of finding a way to circumvent the sanctions and Turkey was continuing business with Iran. It was uncertain how much longer and further the sanctions could go. They had virtually reached a limit.

The sanctions relief comes at a time when Libyan energy supplies have become disrupted and insecurity is on the rise in Iraq. An increase in Iranian hydrocarbon exports can offset this. The opening up of Iranian trade will also help the ailing economies of the European

Union and Turkey, which have been negatively affected by the trade cutoff with Iran too.

What has probably made US allies and clients the most nervous about rapprochement between Iran and the US are the secret negotiations both sides were having before the Syrian chemical weapons incident in Ghouta. The US had been secretly negotiating with Russia and Iran for a political settlement in Syria.

The threats to attack Syria due to the chemical attack in Ghouta were aimed at giving the US leverage in these negotiations with Moscow and Tehran. As soon as an American-Iranian-Russian agreement to reduce tensions was reached, the Saudis became scared because they were probably kept in the dark about what was happening in the backchannels. Even the Israeli media has insinuated that the Iranians persuaded their Syrian allies to give up their chemical weapons in exchange for a broader US bargain with Tehran and Damascus as a result of an initial secret deal between the US and Iran.

Throughout the negotiation process there has been pressure on Iran from US allies. Parallel to Wendy Sherman's request in October 2013 that the drive to write new sanctions against the Iranians be halted, the Israeli military publicized a «special long-range flight exercise» and showed its footage as a veiled threat to the Iranians. This could have been a sign that Israel was against US negotiations or a move meant to help the US by pressuring Tehran into making a deal with Washington.

The French engaged in some underhanded moves in November 2013. Not only did Paris want to preserve its influence over the medical nuclear isotope market, but it was also bribed. French President Francois Hollande told the Israelis and the Saudis that he would oppose any easing of sanctions against the Iranian economy and as a result the French stonewalled the negotiations. France was repaid through lucrative arms contracts in the Middle East.

Even though France was responsible for disrupting the negotiations in Geneva, the US publicly blamed the Iranian side. This prompted Foreign Minister Zarif into rhetorically asking Secretary Kerry the following on Twitter: «Mr. Secretary, was it Iran that gutted over half of US draft Thursday night? [A]nd publicly commented against it Friday morning?»

If it was not apparent right away, it became apparent afterwards that the US was coordinating with the French too. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov would explain later that the US had actually prepared a draft that included all the French demands and circulated it to all the other negotiating teams «literally at the last moment, when we were about to leave Geneva.»

Even while headway was being made on the diplomatic front, the US and the EU refused to loosen the noose. The General Court of the European Union (EGC), which deals with legal proceedings involving the European Union and its different bodies, ruled on September 6, 2013 that the EU sanctions against several Iranian companies were illegal and annulled the EU asset freezes placed on these companies. The European Commission, however, decided to ignore the court's legal rulings and continue with the sanctions against Iran and the same Iranian companies that the EGC ruled in support of in the legal case.

So many domestic and international interests are involved in the nuclear negotiations. The negotiations have little to do with the Iranians nuclear energy program and more to do with the international system and order. It will surely take almost an entire year before a proper

appraisal can be made what the outcomes will be and if Tehran and Washington will restore their ties fully.

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