

The Post-Iran Nuclear Deal Scenario

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Now that the Iran nuclear deal is being implemented, it is perhaps time to ask, what does it mean for Iran, for other nations in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), for Israel, for the United States of America, for Europe? What does it mean for the world as a whole?

Iran

With the lifting in mid-January 2016 of years of crippling economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations, Iran is now able to trade openly with the rest of the world including exporting its oil. Both the Iranian government and private companies are purchasing goods and equipment from abroad. Iran is also now re-connected to the international financial system. All this hopefully will strengthen the Iranian economy and improve the standard of living of the people.

As Iran embraces the international financial system, it should be cautious about embarking upon massive privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, accompanied by the elimination of essential subsidies, as demanded by certain global financial institutions and actors — in short pursuing a “neo-liberal” agenda — which invariably works to the detriment of the majority of the populace. The Rouhani government should ensure that some of the pillars of post-1979 Iran such as people’s cooperatives and Waqf (bequeathal) enterprises remain at the forefront of the planned economic transformation, albeit with fundamental changes aimed at enhancing professionalism and curbing corruption.

How will these economic changes impact upon Iranian politics? If the lower and middle classes benefit significantly from the post-nuclear deal economic scenario, it is conceivable that the reform oriented Rouhani government will become politically stronger but as it is the conservative forces linked to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are still quite formidable. This is why one of their organs, the 12 member Guardian Council has been able to exclude thousands of candidates from contesting the Majlis (parliamentary) election and the election to the 88 member Assembly of Experts expected at the end of February 2016.

One of those aspiring for a seat in the powerful Assembly of Experts which not only monitors the Supreme Leader but also picks his successor who has become a victim of the power play of the conservatives is Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hassan is known to be close to former President, Muhammad Khatami, the charismatic icon of the reform movement.

In fact, Khatami himself continues to be subjected to various restrictions engineered by the conservatives, including a ban on the use of his picture in the state media and orders prohibiting him from speaking at public universities. Two reformers who stood for the

controversial 2009 Presidential Election, former Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi, and former Parliamentary Speaker, Mehdi Karroubi, are still under house arrest. Though conservative, authoritarian structures and personalities hold sway at this juncture, the post nuclear deal environment may yet help the seeds of change to bear fruit faster than many think.

WANA

Turning from Iran to WANA, the immediate reaction of Iran's adversary, Saudi Arabia, to the nuclear deal has been to assert its power. The intensification of its bombing in Yemen and its execution of the respected Saudi Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, on 2nd January 2016 — in spite of advice from its own allies to refrain from such action against a peaceful dissenter — show a determination to flex its muscles whatever the consequences. Qatar, like most of the other Gulf monarchies, is also lukewarm towards the nuclear deal. Turkey however has formally welcomed the deal.

The attitude of most of Iran's neighbors may have a lot to do with what a number of them perceive as Iran's growing influence and power in WANA. After the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Shia majority Iraq in 2003, a Shia leadership has emerged in Baghdad which in spite of Washington's patronage, does not conceal its deep religious and even political attachment to Tehran. At the same time, the concerted often clandestine attempt by the US and Israel, later aided by Britain and France and abetted by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to oust Bashar Al-Assad through arms in the wake of a small uprising in Daraa in 2011, actually strengthened Iran's hand in Syria as the latter became more dependent upon the former for military and economic assistance. The Syrian conflict also reinforced Iran's relationship with Hezbollah, the dominant political actor in Lebanon which is also fighting on behalf of Assad. By the same token, the armed Saudi suppression of the popular majority Shia revolt against the Bahraini ruling elite in 2011, drew the Bahraini Shias closer to their fellow religionists in Iran. Even in Yemen, it is Saudi intervention to protect the ruler against a complex network of dissenting groups with different agendas that has persuaded some of them to gravitate towards Iran.

Expanding Iranian influence in WANA, it is apparent, is the consequence of circumstance and situation often ignited by the political maneuvers of others which in some instances had ironically undermined their own interests. Of course, some Iranian leaders have also taken advantage of these situations. The upshot of it all is a changing political landscape in which Iran is a significant actor especially in those states with an important Shia element. Faced with this reality, some Sunni governments in the region led by Saudi Arabia fear that the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions will enable Iran to exercise even more clout and threaten its neighbors.

While there is no justification at all for such fears, Iran would do well to assuage this negative sentiment towards it. 'Iranophobia' assiduously cultivated by the Saudi elite in particular which at its root is about Saudi power is intertwined with the Sunni-Shia dichotomy, and an Arab-Persian divide. These two schisms especially the former stirs deep emotions in much of the Muslim world. This is why the Iranian leadership should tread carefully, holding on to its principles in confronting this irrational fear and yet displaying flexibility manifested through skillful diplomacy — as it has illustrated in the negotiations leading up to the nuclear deal.

In approaching the Sunni-Shia challenge, the present Iranian government should perhaps

take a leaf from Imam Khomeini's book. He tried to bridge the chasm between the majority Sunnis and minority Shias globally through certain historical and contemporary events that could bring them together. The commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday was one such instance. *Al-Quds Day* which he inaugurated — the last Friday of Ramadan is now dedicated to the liberation of Jerusalem from Israeli Occupation — was another such occasion.

Israel

Within WANA, there is another actor that is also fiercely hostile to the nuclear deal. This is WANA's only nuclear-armed entity. The Israeli elite's antagonism to the deal has been much more organized than Saudi's. Since Iran from the days of Khomeini has been a committed champion of the Palestinian cause, steadfast in its opposition to Israeli occupation and Zionism, Israel has always viewed Iran as a foe. Even when there was no evidence to indicate that Iran was developing nuclear weapons, Israeli intelligence manufactured so-called 'data' to prove to the world that Iran posed a nuclear threat to Israel and the rest of the region. This is why it went all out to try to stop the US and other Western powers from coming to an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program.

Though it failed, Israel has not ceased to try to wreck the deal. Immediately after sanctions were lifted, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu declared, "Iran has not relinquished its ambition to obtain nuclear weapons and continues to —spread terror throughout the world". Netanyahu is hoping that a new US President at the end of the year will reverse the nuclear deal. It is worth noting in this regard that the Republican frontrunners in the Presidential race are totally against the deal and are vehemently opposed to any rapprochement with Iran.

The United States

The organized, sustained opposition of a segment of the Washington political elite is something that Iran will have to take into account in the implementation of the deal. The longstanding relationship between policy-makers and lobbyists in Washington, on the one hand, and Zionist interests and Israel, on the other, is part of the explanation. In recent years Christian Zionists in the US have played a major role in reinforcing and perpetuating this relationship. Their role today is perhaps more significant than that of the conventional Jewish interest groups which in any case were split on the nuclear deal with some of them endorsing it as an effective mechanism for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. For that reason the deal, they argued, will keep Israel safe. This was also one of President Barack Obama's main arguments for pushing for Congressional endorsement of the deal. He also argued that the US's Arab allies notably Saudi Arabia would feel secure if Iran is stripped of its ability to acquire nuclear weapons.

Some of the other reasons for the deal have not been so publicly ventilated. The US leadership cannot ignore the fact that Iran today is a significant player in a region where US interests are entrenched. As we have shown, from Syria, to Iraq, to Lebanon, to Bahrain, to Yemen, Iran is a force to reckon with. It is also quite conceivable that Washington realizes that its special relationship with Israel, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, on the other, has its minuses. Backing a bellicose Netanyahu blindly does not always serve the US agenda in WANA. Similarly, a Saudi elite that is deeply embroiled in sectarianism and terrorism can sometimes be an embarrassment.

Europe

The changing power balance in WANA is one of the reasons why the European Union and most European states warmly welcomed the nuclear deal. A more compelling factor would be the economic benefits that they hope to reap from an Iran that is open to trade and investments. Iranian President Rouhani has already visited Italy and France and forged a whole range of business deals with both countries. One can expect the Iranian government to do the same with other European states in the near future. There will be obstacles. Influential Zionist lobbies exist in both Britain and France but they do not wield the sort of power that the Christian Zionists command in the US.

There are other countries too from China and Russia to India and Brazil that will also feel the impact of an Iran that is free to trade and interact with the world. But Iran's ties with them were never problematic which is why they are not on our radar screen.

Conclusions.

We are now in a position to draw some important conclusions from our reflections on the post- Iran nuclear deal scenario.

One, the impact of the deal upon Iranian politics and to a lesser extent the Iranian economy is still unclear though it has the potential to wrought significant changes.

Two, while the deal has intensified conflicts in WANA, the changing political landscape also offers hope: a more influential Iran may be in a position to address issues such as the Sunni-Shia divide and thereby reduce friction in the region.

Three, since the deal circumscribes Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons — an aspiration which the leadership has always maintained was never its goal given the Islamic prohibition against such weaponry — Iran should now be in the forefront of a vigorous campaign to ensure that WANA becomes a nuclear weapons free zone in every sense of the term in the shortest possible time.

Four, since Iran together with the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany managed to resolve one of the most contentious contemporary issues in international politics through diplomacy, and in the process, succeeded to avert war, Iran should now take the lead in tabling a resolution at the UN General Assembly banning war forever as a means of settling bilateral, regional and international disputes. War would then be regarded as a crime against humanity.

Five, when war is viewed as a crime against humanity, military arsenals everywhere should also be dismantled. A massive global disarmament movement should be initiated with citizen groups from every nook and cranny participating. It should not be forgotten that disarmament was the revered goal of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the sixties and seventies. Iran is the current Chair of NAM. Shouldn't disarmament become one of the principal aims of NAM once again?

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