



## The Iran Nuclear Deal and its Implications for the Region

By Dr. Yousef Munayyer\*

July 31, 2015

*The agreement reached by the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US), the EU and the Islamic Republic of Iran over the latter's nuclear program is a historic achievement that could have significant implications for the region. The following is a discussion of the deal itself, the conditions that led to the agreement, and just how its implications may play out moving forward for the region in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular.*

### The Deal

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed to on July 14, 2015, and adopted the following October, is a significant achievement in non-proliferation negotiations and the strengthening of the global non-proliferation regime. In return for the relief of sanctions imposed on Iran due to its non-compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to which it is a signatory (NPT), Iran agreed not only to dramatically scale back its nuclear program but it also agreed to unprecedented levels of inspections.

The agreement itself is both highly detailed and yet quite comprehensible to the lay reader. It is largely reflective of the framework agreement announced in Lausanne on April 2, 2015. Perhaps the most illuminating text in the agreement is the inclusion of specific provisions dealing with violations of the agreement. These are in themselves remarkable and in some ways speak to the leap of faith the Iranians took in agreeing to them. I refer here to what has been called the “snap back” sanctions. These provisions include a process for addressing concerns over non-compliance which can lead to a quick return to the *status quo ante* with sanctions re-imposed against the regime, hence “snap back.” The provisions allow for any actor in the agreement to raise concerns about violations and while there are mechanisms developed for multilateral dispute resolution, resolutions can only be achieved if found satisfactory to the complaining party. What this means is that one party, if committed enough, can essentially lead to “snap back” sanctions on their own. In all likely scenarios, if this was to play out it would be the United States playing the role of complainant. In essence, Iran agreed to provisions which put the power of “snap back” sanctions into the hands of the United States forgoing Chinese or Russian veto protection. Much has been made about this agreement being founded on a “trust but verify” ethos. In reality, by agreeing to these provisions in particular Iran has placed a great deal of trust in Washington, which is often referred to by Iranian leaders as the “Great Satan.” This speaks to the rational calculus of Iranian negotiators, far divorced from the rhetoric that has often characterized its leadership.



It should be recalled as well that in the process of selling the Iraq war to the American public, a key argument was that diplomacy has been tried and exhausted leaving only the military option. Leaving the merits of this argument aside, dubious as they may be, it was no doubt a central component in building the argument for war. Should the Iran deal fail, such an argument will arise again to strengthen the case for war, which is an outcome that is not in the interest of either party.

In sum, this suggests all parties consider each other's interests to be geared toward non-defection, which should be recognized as the hallmark of a good international agreement.

### **Conditions that led to the deal**

The incentives that led the parties, and specifically the United States and Iran, to reach this agreement have their genesis in conditions in the region that are older than just the last two years of intense negotiations, and most important among them are the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Iran, these American wars produced both a crisis and an opportunity. On the one hand, Iran was placed on an “axis of evil” list and within months found itself surrounded on two sides by the ground forces of the most powerful military on earth. On the other hand, Iran had common interests with the United States in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and if it played its hand well it could shape outcomes in both theaters to its benefit. While Iranian and American cooperation existed in Afghanistan, most specifically in the early stages of the war, Iran's turning the crisis into an opportunity was of course more clearly seen in Iraq. Once the Americans had destroyed the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, Iran was primed to play a significant role in shaping Iraq's future and that they did. This was done through developing and capitalizing on strong alliances with Iraqi Shia political groups which took control of the Iraqi political establishment. For years, Saddam Hussein's Iraq had served as a check to Iran's influence in the region. With Iraq transitioning into an Iranian client, Iran was freer to project its power and influence further into the region. Additionally, it was concurrent with the American occupation of Iraq that Iran accelerated its nuclear program.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were costly endeavors for the United States in every way imaginable. The blood and treasure spent on executing both wars were significant. The damage to Iraqi civilian life and infrastructure was immeasurable, and so was the harm to US credibility internationally. The war's lack of popularity at home and abroad, and the false pretenses used to justify it, namely, fighting terrorism and destroying weapons of mass destruction, led instead to an unprecedented surge in global incidents of terrorism. The result was an exhausted and weary America left to confront the challenge of Iran's nuclear program.

Critics of the Obama administration have levied the charge that the President failed to send a clear message that the US retained a credible threat of military force against Iran. Military force, however, was unlikely to help the United States' stated policy objective of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran is a resource-rich nation, with a population of nearly 80 million and a strong educated class. Its institutions have independently mastered the nuclear



fuel cycle, and it is only a matter of time before any nation with Iran's profile, if committed to it, can achieve the technological advancements necessary to build atomic weapons. Airstrikes, no matter how robust, would at best highly damage the infrastructure of the Iranian nuclear program, which would be rebuilt by an Iranian government infinitely more determined to cross the weaponization threshold. Such action would not only mean closing off any prospects for diplomacy but would also put the United States in a position of having to choose between engaging in further military action or relenting on their stated objective. Washington, to begin with, needed to avoid facing such a lose-lose scenario.

No statement by the President, no matter how bellicose, and no realignment of strategic military assets in the region would convince the Iranians that any American president, let alone Barack Obama, would be likely to rally a war weary American public to support another Middle East war. Thus, Iran was rapidly expanding its nuclear program at a time when the United States was limited in its ability to carry out a military option that would likely lead to full-scale war. This simultaneously created an urgency to resolve the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program whilst it was clear to all involved that prospects for military action were slim. These conditions, rooted in the United States' military ventures of the past decade, resulted in an international sanctions regime and the reaching of an agreement through diplomatic means.

### **The Iran Deal's Implications**

This agreement also comes in the context of a changing American posture in the region. The vacuum created by the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq was filled in large part by an untenable American occupation. Ultimately, Iraq had to be turned over to Iraqis, a majority of whom are Shia and have sympathetic ties to Iran. The regional partners of the United States knew that the day would have to come when the United States would withdraw from Iraq and draw down its presence in the region. In addition to a decrease in American military assets in the area, US interests were also being shaped by changes in the global resource market. Increasingly over the last decade the United States has been able to produce more oil independently than in the past, reducing reliance on Middle Eastern sources of oil. In explaining his stance on the region recently President Obama stated plainly that "at this point, the U.S.'s core interests in the region are not oil, are not territorial. ... Our core interests are that everybody is living in peace, that it is orderly, that our allies are not being attacked, that children are not having barrel bombs dropped on them, that massive displacements aren't taking place. Our interests in this sense are really just making sure that the region is working. And if it's working well, then we'll do fine."

This is a tectonic shift that has been in the works for a significant period of time. To regional partners, it is a source of anxiety. From their perspective, the United States' war in Iraq led to increased regional influence for Iran and, with less of a reason to commit massive resources to countering this today, the Americans have essentially told regional partners that it is time for them to play an increased role in the region they call home.



However, unless the Iran deal can lead to increased cooperation between regional parties, the message President Obama is sending his regional partners is likely to militate against his stated goal of regional stability. The move toward a deal with Iran and the United States' changed posture in the region have already led regional partners, specifically Gulf States under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, to take increased action to confront what they see as Iranian proxies in the region. This has the potential to lead to devastating consequences in various states and produce breeding grounds for violent extremism.

Regional stability is unlikely to be achieved without advancing genuine cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Opportunities for such cooperation exist today in the battle against the ISIS, which has extended its presence in the region and begun to pose serious security threats to Saudi Arabia, as well as its client regime in Egypt. Tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, however, are likely to continue to revolve around the fault line of sectarian kin. This fault line has long existed in the region but was exacerbated by the Arab uprisings. Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon and elsewhere have often looked to Tehran for support after feeling excluded or unfairly resourced by their governments. Despite the fact that Iran has a small Sunni population which is seen as oppressed, especially in the Kurdish or Baluchi communities, this dynamic does not exist to the same extent in the opposite direction. Serious challenges to the regime in Tehran are unlikely to stem from minority groups but rather within the framework of the Shia-led Islamic Revolution as was apparent from the Green Movement in 2009. Other Gulf States, however, perceive the threats from religious minority groups to be much more severe and central to the security of their regimes. This has led to reactionary and often destabilizing policies of certain Gulf States.

While these demographic realities are unlikely to change and will continue to stoke tensions between Tehran and Riyadh, Gulf States can take steps in the direction of mitigating this by opening their political systems to be more pluralistic and attempt to better address the legitimate grievances of minority populations. While this might be uncomfortable for Gulf States and indeed as President Obama called it "a tough conversation to have", it is important for the United States to push Gulf States in this direction because it is in the longer term interest of peace and stability in the region.

The Iran deal has important implications as well for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most importantly, the resolution of the concerns over Iran's nuclear program which this deal will largely provide moves the Iran issue off the top of the international community's agenda where it has been perched for the last few years. The issue gained this prominence because of the acceleration of the Iranian nuclear program but also because of the persistent efforts by the Israelis to elevate it above all others by raising the prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran. Other crises in the region, like the civil war in Syria, have proven intractable but could possibly become more solvent if Tehran was induced to become more cooperative throughout the region.

It is no secret that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has focused his time in office on raising the profile of this issue. Even in the early years of the Obama Administration, before



the Iran sanctions regime was in full effect, and while the US was attempting to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Netanyahu would routinely reply to Obama's concerns about Israeli settlement expansion by shifting the focus to Iran. Unable to exercise any pressure on Israel during his first term, Obama essentially relented. In his second term, significant personal efforts made by Secretary of State Kerry to restart the process ran up against the intransigence of the Israeli government backed by an increasingly right-wing electorate. Even the ambitious Kerry had to step aside announcing a pause to reevaluate US policy while transitioning to focusing on negotiations with Iran.

The Iran issue has served as a way to deflect American and international attention away from the Israeli-Palestinian issue. This is compounded as well by the fact that various other hot conflicts are raging in the region today. However, if the Iran deal is implemented and begins to succeed, it takes off the table one of the biggest distractions from engaging the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The international diplomatic bandwidth that has been so dedicated to Iran over the last two years is now free of this matter and able to focus on reprioritizing issues.

The conditions still do not exist today to have successful or meaningful negotiations that can lead to an agreed upon just peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but the implementation of the Iran deal could mean that international actors may start taking steps to change those conditions. Israel's vociferous opposition to the deal, which received the often illusive unanimous endorsement in the UN Security Council, is contributing to tensions in ties between Israel and leading Western nations as well. It is conceivable that several states may begin to take actions to pressure Israel now that the Iran issue has been resolved.

President Obama is unlikely to muster the amount of pressure necessary to persuade Israel to restart meaningful negotiations in the short time he has left in the White House. Approaching his final year in office, President Obama is wary of how his actions could impact the electoral race for the Oval Office and both the Israelis and Palestinians know that any process that restarts under Obama will likely have to be continued under the next President who might not be inclined to commit to it. That being said, taking the Iran issue off the table, which this deal does, is likely to have positive implications on the Israeli-Palestinian front which will transcend Obama's presidency.

*\*Yousef Munayyer serves as an Analyst on Middle East Affairs at the Arab Center Washington DC. He completed his PhD in International Relations and Comparative Politics in 2015 at the University of Maryland. He is the Executive Director of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. Previously he directed the Jerusalem Fund and Palestine Center in Washington DC. His opinion and analysis pieces have appeared in a number of mainstream publications, including the New York Times, The New Yorker and The Guardian while his academic writing has been published in the Journal of Palestine Studies.*