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# Iran's Nuclear Deal: Implications of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

Gawdat Bahgat rightfully reminds us that implementing the Iranian nuclear deal will be difficult. If it's done, however, Iran will not only be reintegrated into the global system, it will also fray the long-standing partnerships between 'moderate' Arab states and the Western powers.

By Gawdat Bahgat for ISN

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On 13 July 2015, Iran and the six negotiating global powers (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement seeks to bring a diplomatic conclusion to the decade-long standoff over Tehran's nuclear program. Since the early 2000s Western powers have accused Iran of trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran categorically denies these accusations and asserts that it is interested in civilian nuclear energy. The Western powers argue that economic sanctions have subsequently brought Tehran to the negotiating table, while Iran maintains that its technological advances have prompted the United States and Europe to seek a diplomatic outcome to the conflict. The European Union Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini called the recent deal "historic" and President Obama argued that it "offers an opportunity to move in a new direction" that "we should seize."

It is important not to underestimate the challenges that remain in getting the two sides to endorse and implement the agreement. President Obama and President Rouhani still have to secure the approval of the Congress and the Majlis respectively. Domestic opponents and regional rivals are certain to try to undermine the JCPOA. Still, the agreement has the potential to fundamentally alter the strategic landscape in the Middle East and initiate a new security paradigm. Since the 1979 Revolution, American and European policies sought to isolate Iran and build a military partnership with 'moderate' Arab states. In the regional system that is now likely to emerge, Iran is likely to be increasingly re-integrated and the partnership between Western powers and 'moderate' Arab states is likely to face serious challenges.

## The global parameters

Since the 1943 meeting between the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Saudi King Abd Al-Aziz Bin Saud the United States has committed itself to defend oil-producing countries in the Persian Gulf against any external threat. The withdrawal of Britain 'east of Suez' in the early 1970s left a security vacuum that Washington did not hesitate to fill. U.S. policy then relied on the 'twin pillars' of Iran and Saudi Arabia to protect Western interests in the Persian Gulf and the broader

Middle East. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, brought an abrupt end to this policy. Thereafter, isolating Iran became the cornerstone of US (and to a lesser extent European) policy in the Middle East.

Will the nuclear agreement change this security paradigm? In mid-July 2015 Ayatollah Khamenei was asked what would happen to the “fight against global arrogance” when the nuclear talks conclude. The Supreme Leader answered, “Fighting global arrogance is the core of our revolution and we cannot put it on hold. The U.S. is the true embodiment of global arrogance.” On the other hand, commenting on the negotiation with the United States, former President Rafsanjani stated, “We have broken a taboo. It is not impossible that an American embassy could reopen in Tehran.” [\[1\]](#)

In the last two years US and Iranian diplomats repeatedly confirmed that they were focusing on the nuclear dispute and not discussing regional conflicts. Still, one can argue, the peaceful settlement of the nuclear dispute is likely to bring the two sides closer in addressing common threats. The Iranian Foreign Minister recently stated, “The purview of our constructive engagement extends far beyond nuclear negotiations.” The reality is that Iran has its fingers in almost all pies in the Middle East. These include Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, nuclear weapons proliferation, the war on terrorism, energy security, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Iran, like any other country, can be both part of the problem and simultaneously part of the solution. Reaching an understanding with Tehran would not solve all Middle Eastern problems but would significantly reduce tension.

Economically, assuming that the agreement will be endorsed and implemented, Iran is certain to increase its oil production and exports. It is not clear how long this process would take. But adding hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil would push prices lower and benefit consuming countries and the global economy. With more than 70 million people and a large and well-educated middle class, Iran is likely to attract substantial foreign investment and trade. It might take some time for these developments to materialize, but the process of re-integrating the Islamic Republic into the global economic and strategic system has begun and the country is emerging out of global isolation as a major regional powerhouse.

### **The regional dynamics**

Will the nuclear deal lead to nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East? How will Israel react? How will Gulf states re-assess relations with Iran? It will take some time to fully comprehend the potential impact of the emerging détente between Iran and the United States. Some preliminary assessments are in order.

Opponents of the negotiation with Iran have always claimed that any agreement with Tehran would prompt other regional powers (particularly Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) to acquire nuclear weapons capability. There are fundamental flaws in such an argument. Turkey is a NATO member and already under the NATO nuclear umbrella. In recent years Turkish and Iranian leaders have expressed interest in expanding trade and commercial relations. Lifting sanctions and fully re-integrating Iran would serve Ankara’s national interests. Egypt is currently overwhelmed by domestic security and economic challenges. Acquiring nuclear weapons is not a national priority. Saudi Arabia has the financial resources but lacks the necessary human and technical infrastructure. Buying nuclear bombs from Pakistan is highly unlikely.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has led unprecedented opposition to a nuclear deal with Iran. He described the deal as a “mistake of historic proportions”. This opposition is not likely to wane in the coming months. Israel is certain to mobilize opposition and try to defeat the deal in the US Congress. If the Congress eventually endorses the deal, Israel would be left with few options. A military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would be hard to justify. The lack of progress in the Arab-Israeli peace

process makes any open alliance with Arab countries against Iran unlikely. At the end of the day Netanyahu might find no other option but to live with a deal he strongly rejects but the international community endorses.

The reaction of the Arab world to the JCPOA was not a surprise. The government in Baghdad endorsed the deal describing it as a “catalyst for regional stability that will lead to better unity in the fight against terrorism.” Meanwhile the Sunni tribes expressed concern. Syria’s President Assad is optimistic that Iran will continue to support his regime. Egypt hopes that the deal will facilitate the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. Most Gulf states have expressed hope that the deal will reduce tensions between Iran and global powers and promote stability in the region. Commercial and trade ties between Iran, on one side, and Dubai, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman, on the other, are likely to substantially grow in the coming years.

Saudi Arabia, as expected, has taken the lead in opposing the nuclear agreement in the Arab world. The Saudis (and other Arabs) have expressed doubts about Iran’s nuclear ambitions and fear that Tehran might eventually acquire nuclear weapons. Under such a scenario, the Saudis argue, Iran would further intensify its interference in Arab domestic affairs and become more aggressive in supporting its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Finally, Iran might seek to de-stabilize the Gulf states by further supporting Shiite communities. Against this background the Saudi government endorsed the nuclear deal providing that Iran “use its resources for domestic development and to improve the living conditions of its people rather than use it to incite turmoil in the region.” Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, former ambassador to the United States and former chief of the intelligence services argued that the deal will wreak havoc in the Middle East and that Gulf states have lost faith in Washington as their security guarantor.

### **The way forward**

Anticipating strong Israeli and Arab opposition, American and European officials have regularly briefed their counterparts on the negotiations and provided security and political assurances. On the other hand, in a message to Islamic and Arab countries for the end of Ramadan, Foreign Minister Zarif stated, “By solving the artificial crisis about its nuclear program diplomatically, a new opportunity for regional and international cooperation has emerged.”

If the deal is endorsed by all parties and implemented in good faith it would certainly open a new chapter in Middle Eastern security and strategy. Europe, Russia, and China will continue to be major partners but, rhetoric aside, the United States will remain the leading security guarantor. The current lack of trust in the Obama Administration does not diminish the decades-long strategic ties between the United States, its Gulf allies and Israel. At the same time, Washington has significant strategic interests in the Middle East and will continue its close cooperation with its allies to protect these interests.

History suggests that as countries become more integrated into global and regional systems they will have more interest in promoting political stability and economic prosperity and less incentive to be spoilers. Iran is not an exception. Furthermore, the process of fully re-integrating Iran should not be seen as coming at the expense of other countries. This is not a zero-sum game. The nuclear deal can serve to articulate a new security and strategic paradigm. It can be a “win-win proposition.”

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