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Report

Deal with Iran “Bad Idea” for Arab World*

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Secretary of State John Kerry boards his aircraft at London's Stansted Airport Monday, November 25, 2013 after meetings in London and in Geneva for the Iran nuclear talks [AP]

Abstract

This report analyses the content and timing of the US-Iran nuclear deal, arguing that the deal is bad for the Arab world for four key reasons. While both the US and Iran have their own outlooks on the deal, the report examines the deal from the perspective of the US' Arab allies, a perspective which reflects a feeling of abandonment by their ally with their fundamental interests and concerns completely ignored.

Introduction

On November 24, 2013, the United States struck a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program, making what had been unthinkable for previous years a reality. The US' Arab allies were suddenly left out of equation, with countries like Saudi Arabia making it clear they considered the deal a stab in the back. The deal was particularly frustrating for Washington's Arab allies considering the US' recent retreat from its threats to punish the Assad regime, instead reaching a deal with Russia on Syria's chemical weapons.

The deal may have been a welcome step by the P5+1 countries, and it may carry benefits for the US and Iran, but the implications of the deal may prove to be very negative for the Arab world. This report details four reasons why this is the case.

1. The deal with Iran will not prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons if it decides to do so in the future.

In September, newly elected Iranian president Hassan Rouhani told NBC News that Iran has “never pursued or sought a nuclear bomb and we are not going to do so...under any circumstances.” (1) Iranian officials often refer to a 2005 fatwa (binding religious decree) issued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (2) and reiterated in 2012 that says the “production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam.” (3) Tehran has consistently maintained its nuclear program is purely civilian and peaceful and that it doesn’t want to pursue nuclear weapons.

However, if the Iranians are being forthright, this should mean there is no need for the international community to rush into what French foreign minister Laurent Fabius called a “sucker deal,” (4) one which only addresses the nuclear issue and ignores other serious problems with Iran. Given Iran’s cunning and history of concealing nuclear weapons capabilities (much of what is known about them comes from dissidents or western intelligence sources), there is no guarantee that a partial deal will stop them from acquiring nuclear weapons as soon as they see it is in their interest to do so.

This is a critical moment for Iran – sanctions are finally about to have the desired effect on the country, and lifting them (even if only partially) could buy Iran enough breathing room to return to its old games. Both the US and Iran admit that the current agreement is preliminary, meaning either side could potentially break it. Even if that were to happen, however, Iran would have gained time and money to proceed with its plans. Furthermore, even if sanctions were lifted and then immediately reapplied, they would need another three to six months to be effective.

David Albright, founder and president of the non-profit Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), has been tracking Iran’s nuclear program for several years and estimates that the Iranian regime could have “enough weapon-grade uranium for a bomb in as little as one and a half months” if they wanted to. (5) The current deal requires Iran to halt higher-grade enrichment and dilute or convert its existing reserve to a form not suitable to further enrichment, but Albright believes that this would do little more than slightly increase the time needed to produce enough highly-enriched uranium for one atomic bomb, and that is operating under the assumption that Iran has no secret nuclear sites. (6)

Finally, Obama’s credibility deficit in the Middle East as Syria’s “red lines” turn into “green lights” may signal to Iran that they can continue to push the boundaries with their nuclear capabilities. Quite a few military, political and academic figures in the US already believe Washington could live with a nuclear Iran. (7) On the other hand, because only Israel is capable of responding to a nuclear Iran with similar arsenal, no Arab country, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, will be amenable to an Arab world with a nuclear Iran.

2. The deal with Iran will reverse the current trend in the Middle East, boosting Tehran's geopolitical influence.

Tehran's regional allies in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq are under mounting pressure and their political status, power and funding are being drained. The Arab revolutions and Syrian conflict are seriously eroding their legitimacy, coupled with Iran's decreasing financial and political power in the region since 2008. A deal with Iran at this moment in time will boost its position and that of its allies in the region while abandoning US allies and partners in the region.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah indicated what the deal would do for them given their alliance with Iran, stating, "If [Iran and the US] come to an understanding on the nuclear issue, our axis will be stronger and in a better position locally and regionally," then went on to say, "When great bargains occur, we don't worry about our allies, we trust our allies, and they don't desert or sell us out, unlike your allies. Do you want us to tell you how many times they deserted you and left you on the side of the road?" (8)

Bashar Assad's Alawite regime continues to be propped up by the Rouhani government militarily, financially and politically. In the event Iran reaches a deal with the US, they will have reserved themselves a seat in the Geneva II conference, something Iran will interpret as a geopolitical victory and US allies will interpret as a severe disadvantage. Assad in particular will no longer see a reason to compromise, with or without Geneva II, because he will continue to receive Iranian support if a deal is reached.

3. The deal with Iran will strengthen Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (9) and other radical groups' reach in the region.

A nuclear deal with Iran simply does not address other serious threats, such as its asymmetric capabilities and its support for terrorism and proxies in the region. Tehran finances, arms and trains terrorist groups operating around the Arab world, (10) including small, sectarian militias which spread from Sanaa to Beirut, as well as large armies like Hezbollah which are a stronger force than some Arab armies.

Congress' latest annual terrorism report indicated that Iran's sponsorship of overseas terrorism underwent "a marked resurgence" in 2012, reaching levels not seen in 20 years. (11) Moreover, Hezbollah, one of Iran's largest forces, continues to receive 70 to 90 per cent of its approximately \$1 billion annual income from Iran. (12) Along with this large force active in Syria's conflict on the regime's side, Iran has managed to create, train and support other militias as well, such as the Badr organization, al-Mokhtar Army and Houthi group, all active in other countries including Iraq, Syria and Yemen. (13)

Any improvement in Iran's economic and geopolitical situation will bring with it further support for Iran's terroristic activities.

4. The deal with Iran will exacerbate sectarian conflict.

For many years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made America the target of its animosity, popularizing slogans like, "Death to America," and, "America is the great Satan" in the country. However, with a possible US deal looming, Iran has shifted the target of its animosity to what they call "takfiri groups" so as to avoid the US and Israel's ire. In fact, such a tactic could benefit their relations with the US – focusing on the "takfiriyyun" or "terrorists" is a way for Iran to forge closer relations with the West, particularly given the importance placed on this issue by the West in recent years.

In October 2013, Tehran launched an anti-American billboard removal campaign, ordered citizens not to say "death to America" during Friday prayers, and cancelled an anti-Zionism conference as a gesture of good faith. Instead, the country hosted an international conference on the dangers of "takfiri" movements, defining them as radical religious groups which resort to violence – a term that once was used by Iran to refer exclusively to "Salafist Sunnis," but now has expanded to include any Sunni rebels fighting the Assad regime.

The Iranian regime's rhetoric has influenced religious figures and followers in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and it is significant to note that most important speeches by Hassan Nasrallah, Noori al-Malki, Bashar Assad and Iranian leaders refer directly or indirectly to the "takfiriyyun." Such behaviour has increased levels of sectarianism in the region, reinforcing the view held by some (post-Saddam) that there is a US-Iranian, anti-Sunni axis intent on forming an Iran-led Shiite movement.

Hezbollah has already promised to stay in Syria as long as the conflict ensues, despite former Hezbollah Secretary General Subhi al-Tufayli's warning that the party's latest intervention on behalf of Iran to support Assad has created a new wave of sectarianism in the Arab world. (14)

To conclude this fourth argument about sectarianism, it is important to mention Iraq's Shiite prime minister, Maliki, and the unprecedented violence in Iraq under his rule as well as the return of al-Qaeda over the last two years. (15) Maliki dispatched security forces to attack a Sunni protest encampment earlier this year (16) and continues to allow the Iranian regime to use Iraqi territory to send weapons, armed forces and money to Assad, yet he asked the US administration for weapons to fight "terrorists" during his last visit to Washington.

Conclusion

A good deal with Iran is one which ensures it will not acquire nuclear weapons capability while also assuring America's traditional regional allies that the agreement will not be at their expense. The current proposed bargain meets neither of these conditions.

** This report doesn't necessarily reflect USAK's position.*

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