

Iran after the Nuclear Deal – an Israeli view

Ephraim Kam / March 11, 2016

There is an overall consensus in Israel that the nuclear agreement concluded between Iran and the six governments is an appalling deal –not only for Israel, but for the entire Middle East.

Firstly, it is assumed that Iran has no intention to give up its drive to develop nuclear weapons. Iran paid a heavy price –economically and politically– to have the right to enrich uranium and develop its nuclear capabilities. Therefore, Iran agreed to postpone the advancement of these facilities, in order to remove the economic sanctions, but not to abandon its strategic aim of developing nuclear weapons.

Secondly, the agreement imposed significant limitations on the Iranian nuclear program –limitations such as the number of operational centrifuges, the size of enriched uranium stockpile allowed in Iran, and the regulation of two of the most critical nuclear sites. These restrictions prolong the breakout timeline from a few weeks to one year. However, Iran will continue to maintain the basic capacity to develop nuclear weapons, if and when it decides to break out. According to the agreement, most of these restrictions will be removed after 10 to 15 years. Afterwards, Iran will be allowed to operate a large uranium enrichment program, which will significantly shorten the development of a nuclear bomb.

Thirdly, the inspection regulations imposed on Iranian nuclear sites are stricter than before. However, they still have significant loopholes. For example, Iran bypassed many inspections of nuclear sites by claiming them to be military sites. Thus, these loopholes have manifested critics with deep distrust of Iran to speculate that the agreement will be violated.

Finally, many experts in Israel, US and Europe, believe that western governments should draft a better agreement, which could significantly reduce the Iranian nuclear threat. For example, during the negotiations, the Obama administration demanded the inclusion of regulations on the Iranian missile program. The demands included the closure of nuclear sites in Fordow and Arak. Iran refused to accept such restrictive demands, and the Obama administration decided to reformulate the agreement.

Furthermore, critics speculate that Iran will wait 10 to 15 years until the restrictions are removed before breaking out their nuclear development since a violation of the agreement would result in significant repercussions. However, the possibility of a violation should not be ruled out. In both scenarios, Iran could manifest a nuclear development by not using any of the existing sites due to tight inspections, and creating a new secret site.

Following the nuclear deal, the Obama administration expressed hopes of a dialogue between Iran and western governments leading to Iranian participation in stabilizing the Middle East. Effective stabilization tactics for the region would benefit from Iranian intervention in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and participation against ISIS. Foreign Minister Zarif and President Rouhani expressed interest in dialogue with the Obama administration. However, the Supreme Leader Khamenei in charge of making strategic political decisions stated that dialogue would not happen. Khamenei declared dialogue with the US to be limited only to the nuclear issue. Moreover, after the agreement was concluded, Khamenei emphasized that Iran will continue to support its allies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain and the Palestinian arena.

Furthermore, after the establishment of the nuclear deal, Iran's position in the Middle East vastly improved. Iran's military intervention in Syria as of 2012 strengthened Assad regime's dependence on Iran. Iran became deeply involved in Iraq and has become an important key actor in the Iraqi arena throughout the last decade. Iran's influence in Yemen has grown following the successes of the Houthis since 2014. The establishment of the nuclear deal further strengthened Iran's regional position. Iran is now considered an essential actor in the Middle East. Western governments, including the Obama administration, are certain that Iranian participation is necessary to stabilize the situation in Syria. Iran is considered a major part of the solution, and not part of the problem. Iran's importance has increased after its cooperation with Russia in attacking Jihadist organizations in Syria.

Nevertheless, Iran is currently facing severe problems. The Assad regime is in a far better position than it was in 2014, due to the Iranian and Russian intervention, but it is far from being stable. Iran suffered many casualties as an outcome of its participation in the military operations in Syria, and if the Assad regime collapses, it could become a strategic blow for Iran. ISIS poses a major threat to Iran, since it threatens most of Iran's important allies – the Assad regime, the Shiite armed militias in Iraq and Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia, usually a passive player vis-a-vis Iran, has become much more assertive in the region, specifically in Bahrain, Yemen, and potentially Syria. The Saudis are conducting this assertive policy, because of their concerns towards the nuclear deal, taking into consideration the Obama administration's weakness in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Hence, Saudi Arabia was challenged by Iran by tampering with their oil policies, and by executing the Shiite Saudi leader.

Israel is faced with a new situation following the conclusion of the nuclear agreement. Israel perceived the Iranian nuclear threat as the most significant threat to security. Its attempts to prevent the deal failed, and have caused a tense atmosphere in its relations with the Obama administration. Since the nuclear deal is *fait accompli*, US-Israeli relations must improve. After all, none of them are interested in continuing the controversy, since both are committed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the Obama administration is strongly committed to Israel's security. It is assumed that the US will provide Israel with new weapons and technology to strengthen its deterrence capabilities against Iran and its proxies.

In conclusion, Israel is not alone in opposing Iran's regional aspirations. Sunni Arab

states – like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the small Gulf States - share the same interest. It is not expected that the common interest will be translated into a regional alliance against Iran, as Israel anticipates. However, the Saudis will be careful not to agitate relations with Iran due to fear of a nuclear conflict. A discourse between Arab states and Israel on security cooperation may be expected. Especially since a functioning security cooperation already exists between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Jordan, and potentially between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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