



INSS Insight No. 724, July 27, 2015

The Non-Nuclear Challenges of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran

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In addition to its direct implications for the nuclear realm, the signed agreement between Iran and the world powers on Iran's nuclear program creates a host of far-reaching challenges for Israel. These challenges concern primarily the Palestinian and Syrian arenas, the delegitimization arena, and Israel's special relationship with the United States, including its standing vis-à-vis the administration and the battle for US public opinion.

The US drive to sign an agreement with Iran reflects a strategic choice based on the premise that Iran is part of the solution to the problems in the Middle East, and not part of the problem, namely, the threat to security and stability in the region. Iran appears to be regarded by the US administration as a stabilizing force and a responsible actor that can be relied upon and cooperated with in the struggle against fundamentalist Islam in general and the Islamic State in particular.

On a practical level, this view bespeaks US acceptance of Iran's hegemonic aspirations and effort to expand its influence in the region. The prevalent assessment in the Middle East, and in the international arena as a whole, is that strengthening Iran's regional standing will significantly improve its ability to provide assistance to its allies in the region. This will mean a source of new strength for Hamas, which was forced into a state of strategic hardship after Operation Protective Edge and its loss of strategic support in Egypt following the Muslim Brotherhood's fall from power, and the current regime's view of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and Hamas itself as bitter and dangerous enemies. The improvement in Iran's regional standing could lead Hamas to retreat from its policy of restraint. For Hizbollah, the implications of the agreement are even more far-reaching. The close relations between Iran and Hizbollah and Tehran's commitment to the Shiite organization, which is fighting alongside Iran in defense of Bashar al-Assad's regime, guarantees it an increase in Iranian aid, and consequently, a stronger status in Lebanon and Syria alike and the ability to pose a heightened threat to Israel on the Lebanese and Syrian front.

Moreover, Israel's failure to influence the United States regarding the formulation of the agreement with Iran, as well as the mounting tension between Israel and the US

administration, has negatively affected Israel's standing in the region. In a reality of distinct American support for Israel and considerable Israeli influence on the United States, there is a greater chance that countries in the region that face similar strategic threats and challenges as those faced by Israel (particularly Iran and extremist jihad groups) would be willing to cooperate with Israel along various political and security lines. If until the signing of the agreement pragmatic Sunni countries had an incentive to cooperate with Israel due to its status vis-à-vis the United States, this incentive may ebb, along with the possibility of establishing a regional coalition based, for example, on the Arab Peace Initiative adapted to the new reality in the Middle East.

Regarding the struggle against delegitimization, which has become a genuine strategic challenge for Israel, the agreement may also entail problematic implications. As the agreement is understood by many not only as an Iranian success but as an Israeli failure, it will likely constitute further incentive for parties engaged in the delegitimization campaign against Israel in the international arena. It will be easier to attack Israel when it is perceived as a country working against the world and rejecting an agreement that is viewed as staving off and reducing the chances of war. Israel's image as a warmonger is likely to increase, especially when British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond makes statements in this vein before the British parliament.

In terms of US-Israel relations, President Obama appears to have attained broad public support for the agreement (with the exception of the still-hesitant Congress). He has also bolstered his public standing and the message regarding the presidential legacy he seeks to leave behind. This public support will help improve Iran's image in the eyes of the American public, even as Israel remains the most resolute and vocal opponent of the agreement, in terms of both its nuclear and non-nuclear elements. Israel's position on the agreement is a rejection of President Obama's stance and his political wisdom and is inconsistent with the overall sentiment on the issue taking shape among the American public.

It is therefore safe to assume that should Israel's concern regarding the nuclear agreement fuel an official political initiative opposing a Congressional vote to lift the sanctions on Iran (as opposed to actions by Israeli NGOs and individuals), Israel's status in the United States will be undermined. In such a scenario, Israel could find itself in a bitter confrontation with President Obama and the US administration, and perceived in the eyes of large portions of the US public as interfering in internal US politics. The ensuing tensions, which need not necessarily emerge immediately, could cause Israel to be seen as a problematic force sabotaging American efforts to stabilize the world that could drag the United States into a war that is not its own, in contravention of America's strategic choices and national interest.

Furthermore, President Obama's success in reaching an agreement with Iran may encourage him to leverage this achievement to promote an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, this by pressuring Israel and reconsidering US support for Israel in the international arena. Partner to Obama's vision is Secretary of State John Kerry, who has likewise earned increased admiration in the United States and could be impelled to generate pressure on Israel based on his belief in the possibility of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians, if only negotiations could be resumed. An American initiative to renew the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, which can be expected to enjoy relatively broad public support in the United States, could force Israel into a strategic impasse

From Israel's perspective, then, the implications of the non-nuclear challenges stemming from the agreement between Iran and the world powers include:

- a. The need to reduce Iran's influence in the region, with an emphasis on its support of Hizbollah and Hamas.
- b. The need for strategic reassessment regarding Syria in light of the increasing likelihood of the survival of the Assad regime.
- c. The need to prepare for possible pressure by the US administration to pursue an agreement with the Palestinians under conditions that are problematic for Israel.
- d. The need to engage in organized preparation to contend with the delegitimization challenge.
- e. And, most importantly, the need to prevent further deterioration in American-Israeli relations.

Indeed, Israel's approach to contend with the non-nuclear strategic challenges that were exacerbated by the nuclear agreement with Iran must be based on healing its special relationship with the United States. Therefore, in addition to the need to work with the United States to formulate understandings regarding the response to Iranian violations of the nuclear agreement, Israel should first and foremost refrain from any action against President Obama in the US political arena. This will make it easier for the Israeli government to pursue the following goals:

- a. Assurance of the US commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative and quantitative military advantage.
- b. Formulation of agreements with the US administration regarding measures to offset Iranian support of terrorist organizations that constitute a threat against Israel, including understandings regarding Israeli-initiated actions against game-changing military buildup by Hamas and Hizbollah.
- c. Definition of the Israeli strategic interest in the Syrian arena, with an emphasis on what Israel will be unable to accommodate, and the formulation of understandings with the US administration based on the assumption that the Baath regime – whether under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad or some other leader – will remain in power and succeed in reasserting its control over large parts of the country.

- d. Assurance, through an intimate strategic and intelligence-focused dialogue, of no official Israeli intervention in the US political arena, as well as assurance, alongside Israeli measures aimed at demonstrating a sincere intention to promote a political process, that the administration will not initiate a process toward an agreement with the Palestinians without coordinating the plan with Israel in advance. In this context, Israel must strive to pursue agreements with the administration regarding threshold demands of the Palestinians and the continuation of the struggle against Palestinian incitement and activity against Israel in the international arena.

Resolving the disputes between Israel and the US administration will not only help Israel deal with the threatening ramifications of the nuclear agreement in both the nuclear and non-nuclear realm, but will also help its efforts in the international arena as it contends with the delegitimization challenge – a challenge that will likely intensify, given Israel's solo opposition to the agreement in face of the support by the world powers and other countries for the agreement.

