



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

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ANALYSING THE NORMAL & PECULIAR OF THE US-IRAN RELATIONSHIP: POST THE NUCLEAR DEAL

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Landmark agreements between two former adversaries are typically symbolic of the beginning of a conciliation period. On July 14, 2015, when a nuclear agreement was reached between P-5+1 and Iran, the world community (excluding conservatives) hailed it as a historic deal, promising the beginning of a new era in the US-Iran relations. As both countries have evolved sharing hostile perceptions of one another, this breakthrough was viewed by many as a promising opportunity. Viewed in this context, Iran's prospective role in the Middle East, especially with regard to the Syrian crisis, was viewed by the US as favourable.

The optimism of a possible US-Iran reunion was hinted at by President Rouhani in his UNGA Speech, wherein he expressed that the deal might, "...lead to positive outcomes regarding the establishment of sustainable peace and stability in the region."¹ Additionally, he suggested the Joint

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), should not only be limited to seeking a nuclear deal but be employed in recreating a fresh constructive international order. To the US, he hinted at a constructive engagement by highlighting, '*... (Iran) will not forget war and sanctions but... look to peace and development.*'

However, in less than 90 days of the US-Iran rapprochement, the highest authority in the Islamic Republic had called for an outright ban on future bilateral negotiations. On 07 October 2015, the supreme leader of Iran- Ayatollah Ali Khamenei banned any further negotiations between the two countries. While addressing the Iranian Revolutionary guards, he stated that the '*country (US) is aiming to infiltrate Iran through negotiations*'.² Similarly, on a previous occasion too, the reaction on the Zarif-Obama handshake had invited a strong reaction from the hardliners in Iran. Eventually, the Iranian foreign minister had to apologise for hurting their sensitivities.³

Furthermore, it must be noted that the Iranian Parliament's approval of the 'outline' of the JCPOA is only a trivial matter, as the journey to its implementation begins. Out of the 290⁴ seats in the Iranian Parliament, the support for the deal came from 139 votes. And this is only the initial nod. The adoption day of the Iranian Deal is nearing. 18 October 2015 would mark the starting of the implementation of the JCPOA. These dynamics, of course, are insightful of how domestic politics in Tehran might impinge on foreign policy matters.

At the other end of the spectrum; opposition on further engagement with Iran emerged directly from the White House. The Obama administration has declared that the US will not seek economic ties with Iran. The US commercial sector remains prohibited from conducting business with Iran.⁵

Although both sides may have their validation for such a course of action, it must be remembered that this limited interaction between the two countries is likely to hurt the future of the US strategic posture in the Middle East more than Iran's. As Iran's isolation has ended, it is ready to engage with the international community. Iran now has more than just the US to engage with- economically and strategically.

Thus, on the matters of promoting stability in the Middle East, Iran's cooperation with Russia on a host of issues could be viewed as inevitable.

With regard to fighting the ISIS in Syria, the deep historical crevices that exist between the 'great Satan' and the 'axis of evil' have partially manifested into immense mistrust for any mutual action. It has been clearly established that any country which is affected by the instability in the region is anxiously seeking a solution to the ISIS menace. The US, too, aspires the same. At the recent UNGA meeting, President Obama had conveyed that US is ready to work with either Russia or Iran.

While both US and Iran may be determined to resolve the ISIS crisis, they are in practice fighting for different objectives. The US supports ousting of Assad and remains doubtful about Tehran's intent concerning Syria. A former CIA officer, Reuel Gerech, who was in charge of operations inside Syria, has, articulated that, "*...the primary Iranian objective is to ensure that Assad does not fall...*"⁶

Should this be treated as a sufficient rationale to confirm that a normalising of the US-Iran relations would remain unlikely despite the nuclear deal? While the deal in itself cannot be taken as a sufficient criterion for transforming the bilateral ties, is, nevertheless, one parameter. Nuclear deals have been used as strategic equalizers. They can be viewed as setting a pathway to substantial remaking of ties. However, in the case of US and Iran the concerns in the US have already emerged that, non-nuclear issues might sink the nuclear deal.

It must be reconsidered that the two countries' hostile perception of one another is not likely to change immediately post the nuclear deal. In-fact, in the near future, the flashpoints in the US-Iran relations would become more visible, such as Iran's BMD programme, etc. Decades of enmity between the two countries has resulted in a communication gap that cannot be bridged immediately. The nuclear deal has opened up a channel for communication; however, the countries are likely to be cautious in their approach towards walking the pathway. This should be viewed as a peculiar norm in the US-Iran relations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹“Full text of Rouhani’s 2015 Address to the UN General Assembly” *Times of Israel*, September 29, 2015, Available at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-rouhanis-2015-address-to-the-un-general-assembly/>, Accessed on October 12, 2015.

²Thomas Erdbrink, “Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Warns Against More US-Iran Talks”, *New York Times*, October, 07, 2015, Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/world/middleeast/iran-leader-us-talks.html?_r=0, Accessed on October 07, 2015.

³RohollahFaghihi, “Behind the Obama-Zarif Handshake”, *Al-Monitor*, Iran Pulse, September 28, 2015, Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/zarif-obama-handshake.html#ixzz3o450v007> “Behind the Obama-Zarif Handshake”, Accessed on October 08, 2015

⁴Nasser Karimi, “Iran's Parliament Approves Outline Of Bill To Implement Nuclear Deal”, *US News*, October 11, 2015, Available at <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/10/11/irans-parliament-approves-outline-of-bill-on-nuclear-deal>, Accessed on October 12, 2015.

⁵Tyler Cullis and Amir Handjani, “US Should Forge Economic Ties With Iran” *The Hill*, October 08, 2015, Available at <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/256252-us-should-forge-economic-ties-with-iran>, Accessed on October 12, 2015.

⁶Dugald McConnell and Brian Todd, “U.S. Official: 'Psychological Blow' In Isis Killing Of Iranian General in Syria”, *CNN*, Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/09/politics/iran-general-killed-syria-isis/index.html>, Access on October 12, 2015