

Regional Security in the Aftermath of the JCPOA

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Introduction

On July 14, 2015, an agreement was reached between Iran and the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany (P5+1) on a Joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA) to ensure Iran's nuclear activities are peaceful. This was the culmination of unprecedented intensive negotiations between Iran and the six world powers that had started in 2013. The negotiations were preceded by several UN Security Council sanctions as well as wide ranging unilateral sanctions by the United States and the European Union against Iran.

Allegations about Iran's intention to develop nuclear weapons first were raised by the United States during the presidency of George W. Bush in the early 2000's and later vehemently reiterated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Tehran maintained all along that it had no intention of developing such WMDs, and the wide spread intrusive inspections by IAEA could not provide any evidence to support the claim.¹ Yet, the anti-Western anti-Israel statements made by the populist Iranian president Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) gave credence to such allegations and paved the way for imposition of the crippling sanctions.

Israel was not alone in its efforts to thwart the JCPOA agreement; Saudi Arabia and other Arab governments in the Persian Gulf were also opposed to it. Whereas Netanyahu and the Republicans in the US Congress claimed that it would not stop Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the Arab countries were concerned over the security of the region after implementation of the JCPOA. Deeply dissatisfied with Iran's expanding influence and/or presence in the Arab states of the region (such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen), they feared that after the lifting of sanctions, Iran would be in a position to even further meddle in the internal affairs of Arab countries. Led by Saudi Arabia, they view Iran as a threat to the

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¹See: Gareth Porter, *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, London, 2014.

Persian Gulf security and a destabilizing element in the region as a whole. Some also evaluated the agreement as a clear sign of a historic shift in the US policy from its henceforth trusted ally, Riyadh, to Tehran.

This paper presents a view from Tehran on some aspects of three issues pertinent to the security of the Persian Gulf region and West Asia in the post-JCPOA period: the *Jihadi* movement manifesting today as Al-Qaida, Taliban, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Syrian crisis, and the security in the Persian Gulf.

A brief history

The "Middle East"² definition came into being as a result of the deals made between the two imperial powers of Britain and France after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War.³ Arbitrarily, new countries were carved out of the fallen empire, and artificial nations were created according to the imperial interests of those powers. The arbitrary nature of the new political map of the Middle East provided necessary causes for decades of war, instability, and corruption in the Arab World. Planting Israel, the Zionist state, by the Western powers in the new scheme turned the Arab-Israeli conflict into the major cause of instability and dissatisfaction among Muslims in the region.⁴

The way the so-called Middle East was created by European powers, along with the West's interest in the region's energy, had a great bearing on decades of military dictatorships, corruption, and oppression in the Arab World. The military regimes in the Arab states that held power for over half a century effectively blocked any move towards democratization and political participation of people. Large

²The term "Middle East" is a remnant of Europe's colonial era, when its self-centered view of the world defined other regions relative to its position. Hence, West Asia was named *Near East*, and East Asia was called the *Far East*. Later, the Americans introduced the term "Middle East" to refer to West Asia and North Africa. More recently, the term "Middle East and North Africa" is mostly used. Thus, "Middle East" exclusively refers to West Asia. The term "Far East" has gradually been replaced by the more appropriate term East Asia, but Middle East is yet to be replaced.

³William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Westview press, 2004, pp.113-139, 140-160.

⁴Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, Palgrave, 2004, pp. 89-93, 151-156, 207-214, 252-257, 294-298, 336-341, 387-392, 435-441, 479-485, 532-541.

portions of the national budget were spent on arms, reducing the amount that needed for education, health, and welfare.

During the Cold War, Iran was a close ally and along with Saudi Arabia, a strategic partner of the United States in the Persian Gulf. Iran belonged to the pro-Western countries of the region, as opposed to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, which maintained an anti-colonial, anti-Western stance. Relatively unaffected by the politics of the Cold War, the "Middle East" system was nevertheless deeply influenced by the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 1970s, the Shah's regime developed close political, economic, and security ties with Israel, albeit covert and unofficial.

The year of 1979 as a turning point for the region

Three major events took place in West Asia and North Africa that transformed the region: the Islamic revolution in Iran; signing of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, and the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan.

The Islamic revolution in Iran had immediate and far-reaching effects beyond the region. In the bipolar world of the Cold War every country was either in the Western capitalist camp or belonged to the socialist world. For a dissident in the communist world the alternative was capitalism, and a dissident in the West could only think of communism as a solution. The Iranian Revolution offered the one billion Muslims in the Third world a new "alternative." It presented to the world of the 20th century an "Islamic worldview" and a political system based on Islam. It showed that in the 20th century an Islamic movement could bring down a Western-oriented military dictatorship, heavily supported by the most powerful superpower, and establish an Islamic nation-state in its place.⁵ Within the Middle East the Iranian revolution became a new focal point alongside the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Indeed, throughout the 1980s it overshadowed the latter with the Iran-Iraq war and the concerns over "export of the revolution" to the neighboring countries, drawing the most attention from the media and the scholars of the Middle East.

With the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran was instantly turned into the most radical state in the Middle East and arguably the Islamic

⁵See: Farhad Kazemi and Jo-Anne Hart, *The Shi'i Praxis: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy in Iran*. In: *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, (David Menashri ed.), Westview Press, 1998, pp. 58-72; John Esposito, *Islamic Revolution and Its Global Impacts*, Miami: Florida International University, 1990, Chapters 3, 4.

world. The Revolution provided a boost to political activities of all Muslims. But the actual effect of the Revolution on politicization of the Sunnis was less than that of the Shiites. There already had been a tradition of political activism among the Sunnis in the form of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (The Muslim Brotherhood. – Editor's note.) and the *Salafiyah* movement. It did, however, give Shiites reason and motivation for political activity.

The second major event in 1979 was the signing of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. For the first time since the creation of the state of Israel in Palestine the head of the most influential Arab country signed a peace agreement with the Zionist state. The Arab reaction to the Camp David Accords was swift, and Egypt – the political leader of the Arab world since World War II – lost its position and gave it up to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi leadership empowered by its sizable oil revenues in the 1970s, moved the Arab world and the Palestinian movement towards a relative conservatism and compromise vis-à-vis the United States and Israel. This further alienated an increasing portion of the Arab world and the Palestinian community and pushed them towards the more radical groups in the region. The Saudi government also embarked on a long-term project in its self-assumed role as a leader of the Muslim world; it began funding and building religious schools across the world that would teach young Muslims students the Saudi Arabia's ultra-conservative ideology of *Wahhabism*.

The third major event in 1979 was the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. In their effort to build and organize a resistance movement against the Soviet invasion, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan helped to create the Sunni radical movement that led to the emergence of the Taliban and al-Qaida.⁶ It is critical to understand what happened in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion. From the US' point of view, the Soviets adventure in Afghanistan had to be stopped at all costs. Hence, the alliance between the US, Saudi Arabia, and neighboring Pakistan. Afghanistan was inhabited by a very traditional mostly rural Muslim population. Any successful attempt to resist the Soviet occupation had to draw on the traditional beliefs and religion of the Afghan people: a holy war against the Communist infidels. The Saudi's with their newly found wealth thanks to the oil price hikes in the 1970s and leadership ambition after the Camp Davis Accords were

⁶Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton Univ. Press, 2010, p. 171.

more than willing to be part of this alliance. The military government of Pakistan also jumped on the opportunity to join the alliance. The US leadership, Saudi money and *Wahhabi* ideology, and Pakistani military help created a formidable *Jihadi* resistance movement in Afghanistan. Children of millions of Afghan refugees in neighboring Pakistan that attended the Saudi-funded religious schools filled the ranks of the *Jihadi* movement against the Soviet occupation.

The resistance movement was effective in making the occupation costly for Moscow; the Soviet forces eventually pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989. However the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan in effect gave birth to a creature that later came to be a brutal and violent force: the Taliban and al-Qaida. As the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Taliban stepped into the void and overtook the country. The Saudi element of the *Jihadi* force turned against the US and carried out the 9/11/2001 tragic bombings in the United States.

George W. Bush's misguided and tragic adventure in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11 bombings in 2001 initiated a chain of reactions, the aftermaths of which are felt today. These adventures led to the emergence of a failed state in Afghanistan and destabilization of the entire region. The stunning socio-political developments in the Arab world that started in Tunisia in December, 2010, and spread to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria are still unfolding. The bloody civil war in Syria has already caused tens of thousands of civilian deaths, millions of refugees, and billions of dollars of damage in houses, infrastructure, and properties. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of ISIL. In a matter of months, ISIL conquered vast territories in Iraq and Syria and has declared an Islamic state in those territories. Iraq and Syria are not the only casualties of this new phenomenon. Other countries of the region – Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Iran, and Yemen – have also been drawn into this expanding conflict. Outside powers have also been involved. Aside from the US and European countries, Russia has entered the scene with its air strikes against anti-Assad forces in Syria.

The effects of unprecedented developments in West Asia and North Africa, the Syrian civil war and the brutality of ISIL have not remained confined in the Middle East region. Europe is facing the most critical refugee crisis on its borders and ISIL terrorism in the streets of its capitals, the most recent of which were those in Paris in December, 2015.

The "Shiite Crescent"

The sequence of events that started with the Islamic Revolution in Iran – the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Camp David Accords, the emergence and subsequent toppling of the Taliban, the emergence of al-Qaida, the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the toppling of Saddam's regime by the United States, and the failure of the American campaign in Iraq – has brought about a major shift in the balance of power away from the Sunnis to the Shiites as the new Islamic power in the region. The alarmists that warn about this new development see the Islamic Republic of Iran as the leader of the emerging "Shiite Crescent." Furthermore, they also blame President Bush whose campaigns under the "War on Terror" rid Iran of two of its dangerous enemies: Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.

The emergence of a greater Shiite power and influence only served to bolster Iran's position. In the eyes of some Western governments, it also expanded the Islamist war against the West to a new multi-front battleground and weakened the Sunni states of the region, which feared the formation of a "Shiite Crescent" extending from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In Iraq, the majority of the population is Shiite and the post-Saddam government there is in hands of Shiites sympathetic to Tehran. The policies of Damascus have also been in line with Tehran, rather than the Sunni Arab countries of the Persian Gulf.

While it is true that Hezbollah was created by and receives political support from the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has shown to have become an independent entity and not a mere stooge of Tehran. The same can be argued regarding the Shiite-dominated Iraqi regime in Baghdad. Despite the long and close relationship between Tehran and the current Iraqi officials, who were in opposition during Saddam's rule, the Iraqi government does not take orders from Tehran.

The West's fears about Iran's increasing power and influence were accompanied by allegations that Tehran was pursuing a clandestine nuclear program against its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The Syrian crisis

The Syrian crisis has turned into one of the most critical foreign policy challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran. In spite of the fact that Syria and Iran do not share common border, Syria has been critical in implementing Tehran's initiatives in the region, especially in regards to Lebanon and Israel. After five years of the civil

war, several hundred thousands of casualties and the changing status of the Assad regime, Tehran perceives a threat to its influence in the region and its power. On a larger scale, Tehran perceives a threat to its revolutionary ideology and values, and to Iran's national interests and security. Ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979 and establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been threatened by successive American administrations with regime change. It became particularly critical after the neoconservatives took power in the Bush administration and the introduction of the so called Greater Middle East initiative.

This initiative openly attempted to overthrow/change regimes in the Middle East which were opposing Israel. It has begun with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Autonomy and continued with Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The initiative did not achieve all of its stated goals and has been shelved quietly after George W. Bush. Yet, after the dramatic developments in the Arab world, named the Arab Spring, many among the Iranian opposition overseas believed, or hoped that after the regime change in Syria, the Islamic regime in Iran would fall. This perception seemed to be shared by the leader of the Islamic Republic and his hard-line followers, especially the Revolutionary Guard and the individuals, directly responsible for Iran's foreign policy in the Levant.

The Syrian regime has been an important ally of Tehran. First, immediately after the Islamic Revolution in Iran the Saddam Hussein forces invaded Iran. During the eight-year war that followed, all the Arab regimes supported Saddam, albeit some covertly. Syria was the only exception: it remained the only Arab state that supported Iran in its war with Iraq. Second, shortly after the establishment of the revolutionary government in Iran, the US-backed Israeli occupation of Lebanon provided a pretext for Iran to get involved in that country. In less than a decade it created Hezbollah in the Shiite community in Lebanon. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah created an extensive social, health and education network in the poor neighborhoods of Beirut and in South Lebanon. It further trained an effective militia to oppose the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon.⁷

⁷Initiatives by more radical elements within the Islamic regime in the early years to export the revolution to the neighboring countries had little success among the Persian Gulf states and Afghanistan and only limited success in Iraq. However, the initiative in Lebanon such as a creating the Hezbollah was a shining success, affording Tehran the power to influence events in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in Lebanon itself, and in the wider region. Hezbollah does not take orders from Tehran, but it is a vital ally on the Israeli borders and in Syria.

Hezbollah's success in pushing the Israeli army out of Lebanon and ending its twenty-year occupation turned it into a national liberating force.

It can be argued that the Islamic Republic and Israel have been involved in a proxy war during the past three decades. Through its formidable influence in Washington, D.C., Tel Aviv has successfully managed to inflict substantial damage to Iran. Tehran, on the other hand, has benefitted from Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon and on the Israeli border. Tehran's relations with Hezbollah are critically dependent on cooperation with the Syrian regime. If the pro-Iran regime in Syria falls, it would substantially undermine Iran's influence and maneuverability in the region.

From Tehran's point of view, the fall of al-Assad and dismantling of his regime has other far reaching consequences, not only for Iran but for the entire Middle East region. As the war continues, Syria's territorial integrity is increasingly endangered. This would certainly be viewed as a threat to Iran's security in the long run. Syria's fragmentation will affect other neighboring countries, including Iraq. Any attempt by Syria's two million Kurds for independence and creation of a Kurdish state would have serious consequences for Iraq and Iran, both of whom have large Kurdish population at their shared border. Both in Iraq and Syria, the Kurds already enjoy a semi-autonomous status.

Being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, Iran is also concerned about identity politics that has been on the rise in the region. Though predominantly Shiite (Shiites are a small minority in the 1.6 billion Muslim world), most of Iran's borders are inhabited by Sunnis and ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Turkmens. Shi'ism is the ideology of the Islamic revolution and has remained a determining factor in the formation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Tehran sees itself as a leader of the world's Shiites and is concerned about their fate in Syria, Lebanon, the Indian sub-continent, Iraq, and the rest of the Persian Gulf. There has emerged a rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran that is playing out with deadly consequences in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and more recently in Yemen. This is not a rivalry that Tehran would seek.

Ever since the Revolution, the Iranian government has hailed Syria as the most important state in the frontline opposing Israel. Fall of the Syrian regime is also seen in Tehran as a major boost to Israel's power, a country that has openly called for invading Iran and bringing about a regime change in Tehran.

Tehran is also increasingly concerned about ISIL, whose radical Sunni ideology and violent actions work against security of the region. Tehran evaluates continuation and escalation of the civil war in Syria as an ideal opportunity for violent and extremist forces to gain further presence and influence in the region.

One can trace a gradual shift in Tehran's position vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis, especially since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. To be certain, the shift reflects the changing realities of the Syrian crisis and strategic and geopolitical considerations in the Middle East. It seems that some influential figures in the Iranian leadership now have come to the conclusion that Syria cannot hold together as a stable and unified country as long as al-Assad is in power. After four years of the war no one expects Bashar al-Assad to regain his power and authority over Syria. Tehran does not really care that much about al-Assad himself, and his regime. The alliance with the Syrian regime since the Iraqi invasion in Iran in 1980 was not based on ideological considerations: The *Baath* party that has ruled Syria is both secular and socialist. At minimum, Tehran would like a government in Damascus that is not hostile to Iran. At maximum, it would rather have an ally that would be a partner to facilitate Tehran's policies in the Levant. With the rapidly changing situation in Syria, it seems all but certain that Syria will not remain a unified state. Tehran would like to see its influence continue in at least the part of Syria, where access to Lebanon would remain intact.

Security of the region

Opponents of JCPOA have been extremely vocal in their condemnation of Tehran as the major threat to the security of the region. Some in the US Congress went as far as suggesting Iran as a threat to the world peace; Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu compared Iran's threat to the world security with that of Hitler's Germany. Saudi Arabia sees Tehran as the sole destabilizing element in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and other Arab countries.

There are two dimensions to Tehran's status in the region and these are perceived as a threat. One is related to military capabilities – both conventional and non-conventional – that Tehran has or is trying to acquire. The other accrues from Tehran's political and ideological influence in the region, especially in the Arab countries.

The military dimension, in turn, has to do with Tehran's alleged ambitions to acquire WMD, and with its other military goals and capabilities. The agreement on the JCPOA has effectively eliminated

the possibility of a nuclear armed Iran. The unprecedented intrusive and widespread IAEA inspections, stipulated in the JCPOA, make it all but impossible for Tehran to go along that path. Also, the IAEA Director General's report in December, 2015, on PMD (possible military dimension of Iran's nuclear program) in effect closed the file on allegations that Tehran pursued nuclear arms. As for the conventional military dimension, a look at the money Tehran has spent on arms in the past few years compared to its neighbors in the Persian Gulf proves illuminating. Iran is a large country with a population of over 75 million. Relative to its size, population, and GNP, it has spent little on arms. In fact, Iran's military budget has been well below international norms. The same cannot be said about Iran's southern neighbors in the Persian Gulf. In the words of Anthony Cordesman, "enough past declassified data, and data from key NGOs like the IISS and SIPRI is available to provide considerable insight into the level of effort given [Persian] Gulf countries can afford, and the broad trends in arms transfers." He writes: "These data make a conclusive case that the Arab Gulf states have had an overwhelming advantage over Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms. The relative patterns in military spending ratios in military spending show that Saudi Arabia alone has spent at least four times as much on its military forces as Iran and that the GCC⁸ has spent 6 to 7 times as much (than Iran. – Translator's note)."⁹

In spite of the falling oil prices, declining revenues and increasing budget deficits, Saudi Arabia and its Arab neighbors have continued their arms purchases. "Over the past 18 months," wrote Cordesman in April, 2015, "the US has approved the sale of more than 24bn USD of weaponry to Saudi Arabia."¹⁰ Saudi Arabia outspends the Islamic Republic 5 to 1, and the small country of United Arab Emirates spends 1.5 times as much as does Iran on arms.¹¹ Ostensibly, the Arab

⁸Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. Editor's note.

⁹Anthony H. Cordesman, *Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Now Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., April 28, 2015, p. 4. Available at: <http://csis.org/publication/military-spending-and-arms-sales-gulf>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Trita Parsi, *The Myth of the Iranian Military Giant*, Foreign Policy, July 1, 2015. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/10/the-myth-of-the-iranian-military-giant/>

countries of the Persian Gulf are spending these huge sums of money on arms in order to defend themselves against a possible aggression by Iran. Yet, Tehran has neither the military power nor, it seems, any intention to start a military adventure in the Persian Gulf. Certainly, the massive American military presence in the Gulf makes such an act unthinkable.

What Tehran does have, and that is what has turned into Saudi Arabia's nightmare, is political influence, not just in the Persian Gulf, but in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as well. The Saudis would add to that Yemen, Bahrain, and Palestine, where they claim the Islamic Republic propagates the Shiite ideology, sectarianism, and violence. In the eyes of Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies in the region, the emergence of "Shiite Crescent" extending from Iran to Iraq to Syria and Lebanon directly challenges Riyadh's claim of leadership of the Islamic world. Iran's influence is there and there is nothing Saudi Arabia and its allies in the region can do about it. There have been deep historical ties between Iranian peoples and those that live in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. In fact, in pre-modern era many of these were part of the Persian empire. Tehran is making use of this historical and cultural capital in pursuing its goals in West Asia. In a world where the United States, from all the way across the globe, enters the region, topples entire political regimes in sovereign countries and declares the affairs of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria as a matter of its own national security, one cannot expect Tehran to stay away from its neighbors. Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and many European countries are all involved in the region – many of them militarily. Saudi Arabia, in particular, whose state ideology of *Wahhabism* is the same as that of ISIL, has been blamed for supporting this violent and extremist group.

Conclusion

Developments in West Asia and North Africa in the past decades, especially in the past few years, have drawn the world's attention to this region. Never since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century has the region been so volatile and explosive. Threat of a nuclear Iran that would endanger regional peace, raised vehemently by Israel and the United States, can now be considered resolved after the agreement on JCPOA in Geneva. The Israeli occupation of Palestine remains the oldest unresolved issue that continues to adversely affect the region. The civil war in Syria and the threat of ISIL have now become the pressing issues that need to be

dealt with. International efforts in the framework of conferences engaging all parties concerned – both regional and international – have raised cautious optimism that a long-term solution might be in sight. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon. One may argue, however, that three decades after the Revolution and with passing of the first generation of the revolutionaries, Iran is inevitably headed towards moderation. That may not be true in the case of Saudi Arabia with its extremist *Wahhabi* ideology (shared by ISIL and other violent groups active in the region) and its new assertive foreign policy in the region as seen in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.