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Continuity, Change, and the Islamic Republic of Iran

Regional Implications of the Iran Nuclear Deal

by Hussein Banai

A year and a half since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the permanent five countries of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), not much has changed in Iran's regional behavior. This was to be expected, given the fact that JCPOA was exclusively an arms control agreement and did not touch on Iran's foreign relations.

In Syria, where the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) paramilitary and intelligence units have been most active since the start of the popular uprisings against the regime of Bashar al-Asad, Iran's policy has remained consistent despite the infusion of Russia military assistance on the side of Asad. Having a strategic foothold in the Levant has been a longstanding priority of the IRGC's, which almost defines its legitimacy almost solely in terms of its defense of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideals against Arab and Israeli interests in the region. The longevity of the Asad regime in Syria, therefore, not only safeguards Iran's proxy, Hizbollah, in next-door Lebanon, but also keeps intact its strategic clout around Israel. JCPOA had no discernible effect on either one of these priorities.

Similarly, Iran's contentious relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf Arab monarchies have continued along the same path as before. Prior to the signing of the JCPOA, Saudi Arabia made no secret of its opposition to the Obama administration's diplomatic dialogues with Iran (the first of such contacts since 1980), and warned of dire consequences in the form of increasing Iranian belligerence and anti-Sunni activity. Since JCPOA, the rhetorical and proxy wars between Iran and the Kingdom in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have continued apace.

MES Notes

AY17 MES Iran Panel

This issue of Insights carries essays provided by the speakers who participated in the 10 January 2017 panel "Continuity, Change, and the Islamic Republic of Iran" hosted by Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University. The panel served as both part of the 2017 MES Lecture Series "Great Power Competition in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Today" and part of the Diplomacy and Statecraft instructional block for the Marine Corps War College.

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Some had feared the beginning of an arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but the military guarantees provided by the United States coupled with the apparent internal instability in the Kingdom have thus far precluded that possibility.

From the standpoint of sectarianism in the region, too, Iran's role in fortifying Shi'ite political parties and militias in the Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has continued along the same lines as before the signing of JCPOA. Iran's leaders view the presence of a solid Shi'a crescent from western Afghanistan to the shores of the Mediterranean as an important instrument for the spread of their cultural and national interests in the region. It is important to note here that even through some of the most isolated periods of its existence the Islamic Republic has managed to project its influence in pursuit of such causes. After all, it was during the highly solitary eight-year period of the Iran-Iraq War that the IRGC founded and nourished Hizbollah in southern Lebanon. The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" simply have provided Iran with greater freedom of movement to consolidate otherwise disparate pockets of Shi'ite populations in Sunni-majority countries.

Lastly, the continuity in Iran's pursuit of the preceding set of interests can best be gleaned through its actions against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Iranian leaders view the advent of ISIL as a symptom of the broader malaise engulfing Sunni Arab countries in the region, which first revealed itself in the 2010-11 Arab uprisings. ISIL is far less a threat to Iran's interests than it is to the Arab-led regional order. As such, Iran's leaders have sought to exploit this vacuum by increasing their military and political support to Shi'ite actors in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—all under the guise of combating ISIL terrorism.

The JCPOA was a signal achievement in halting Iran's nuclear program and committing it to a far more stringent set of obligations and intrusive inspections than those required by the Nonproliferation Treaty. As of this writing, both Iran and the other parties to the agreement verifiably have complied with the letter of the JCPOA. Since the signing of the deal, Iran's regional behavior has remained consistent with its past actions and policies, which, given the limited scope of the JCPOA, was to be expected.

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The Challenge of the IRGC Model in the Middle East to the United States

by Alex Vatanka

For the Trump administration, the various challenges presented by Iran will be a key test for American policy in the Middle East. One of the first steps the Trump White House should take is to stop compartmentalizing its Iran policy.

The excessive differentiation between Iranian "hardliners" and "moderates" by the outgoing Obama administration has proven to be entirely unhelpful in arming the US to counter ongoing Iranian threats to the national security of the US and its regional allies.

This is an important point. There are still plenty of voices in Washington that argue that the safeguarding of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran still needs to be prioritized above all. This is a mistake and unnecessarily limits the needed US pushback against Iran's expansionist policies in the region.

Cutting back on the number of centrifuges is not tantamount to moderation of Iranian behavior.

Nor has it proven to be the case. The team of President Trump needs to, early on, publicly and forcefully highlight Iranian interventionist behavior that has one aim: the expansion of Iranian power.

The so-called “moderates” are not, in fact, in charge of Iran’s regional policies. The forces—principally the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—that run Iran’s ideologically, and often sectarian, regional polices, are not interested in finding accommodation with Washington.

Take the case of Iraq. Since 2003, all of Iran’s ambassadors to Baghdad have come straight from the ranks of the Qods Force, the external branch of the IRGC that is run by General Qasem Soleimani. It is the men in IRGC uniform that are, in essence, in operational control of Tehran’s regional actions, and the many conciliatory statements made by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif amount to little in this vital context.

The top brass at the IRGC is a close-knit group of men that has been working closely with one another for some 40 years. Anti-Americanism is a core part of their worldview. They are, however, not suicidal as such and forceful US stance against their policies is highly likely to shape their calculations. There are already signs that the IRGC bosses believe it is essential that they reduce provocations against the US as the Trump team moves into the White House. As one top IRGC general, Mohsen Rezai, put it, “there are some sensitive days ahead between Iran and the American generals.”

Assertive posturing is the only way the US can push back against the spread of the worst tendencies of the Iranian regime. At home, it took these hardliners some 20 years to impose their rule over the Iranian people. These same Iranian hardliners are hell-bent on spreading their way of life to other parts of the Middle East. Witness in Iraq where the IRGC is busy creating a minion of itself in the shape of the Shi’a militia movement that goes by the name of Hashd Shaabi or “Popular Mobilization Forces”.

The generals of the IRGC have made plenty of inroads across the region thanks to conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain and elsewhere. But the US is capable to counter this Iranian threat if it prioritizes a concerted effort to counter it. The future of US national security interests in the broader Middle East depends on it.

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The Lion in between the Bear and the Eagle

by Amin Tarzi

In the midst of prospects of better coordination and understanding between Russia and the United States in their counterterrorism policies in the Middle East, the trajectory of their respective relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran may become the litmus test for their future cooperation or confrontation in the Middle East.

Until recently, relations between Moscow and the other two have been frigid. The last country to which Iran lost a war resulting in major territorial concessions was Russia in the nineteenth century. An argument can be made that the first major rupture of the Second World War alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States and the beginnings of the Cold War began after the Soviet Union refused to leave northern parts of Iran that it wanted to form into Soviet-dependent Azeri and Kurdish republics. In that episode, the United States helped protect Iran’s territorial integrity.

The current warming of relations between Tehran and Moscow can be understood through the prism of shared concerns, such as stability of Bashar Asad regime in Syria, the advent of the Islamic State phenomena threatening both countries, common concerns about the future of Afghanistan, and until recently, the distrust of the United States generally and Washington's Middle East policies in particular. It is in Syria where Iran and Russia have had an unprecedented level of commonality in their political goals and in coordination of military efforts.

While the political aims of Moscow and Tehran converge on safeguarding the Asad regime and defeating Sunni jihadists, their longer-term objectives do not. Iran wants to turn Syria into its proxy in the Arab world and a springboard for expanding its Islamic revolutionary mindset. Russia is using the Syrian theatre for cementing its military reach and proving its trustworthiness in the region, thereby expanding its political clout and armament market. Despite all of the coziness between the two partners, there is evidence of a cooling trend. Iran terminated Russia's rights to use a military base for its air assets in 2016, while Moscow is courting the new US administration to join the Syrian peace talks over Iran's objections.

The strategic objectives of Russia and Iran in Syria notwithstanding, until the change of administration in the United States, Moscow and Tehran found cooperation viable mainly due to their shared opposition to Washington. However, for Moscow, the prospect of a more constructive relationship with Washington is good news for matters with much greater strategic significance than Syria. The intensification of Iran-US tensions could weaken the prospects of an improved relationship unless Russia changes course on its policies on Iran including but not limited to stopping its coordinated military campaigns in Syria and the final delivery of S-300 SAM systems.

Russian ambassador to Tehran Levan Dzhagaryan recently told the Iranian press that his country was concerned with the "escalation of rhetoric" between Washington and Tehran, adding that Moscow would spare no effort to help reduce the tension between the two countries. The question those in Tehran might be asking is how trustworthy is Russia's friendship. Here history should help inform Iranian calculations.

Should the new US administration and Russia pursue a renewed strategy in Syria, Iran may start feeling like Russia's jilted lover, replaced by Turkey. Iran's absence or diminished presence in designing Syrian solutions would empower Turkey to push harder its strategic objectives in the region and necessitate the United States to reevaluate and reinvigorate its relations with Turkey. The immediate outcome for such an approach would be the survivability of the Asad regime and a reassessment of the Kurdish question. This would be a victory for Russia and Turkey, not Iran.

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