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Building bridges of understanding

Anxious Allies: The Iran Nuclear Framework in its Regional Context

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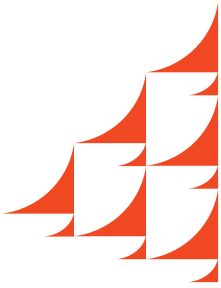

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April 4, 2015

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By Hussein Ibish

The framework agreement on Iran's nuclear program achieved by the U.S.-led P5+1 international coalition in many ways goes further, and is significantly more detailed, than most observers had considered possible. However, even as it opens up additional possibilities regarding diplomacy with Iran and the potential for a long-term solution to the question of its nuclear agenda, it leaves significant questions unanswered and raises new concerns that must be urgently addressed. In particular, questions likely to arise in Congress and elsewhere about the specifics of the framework, and perhaps even more significantly among traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East regarding the overall context of the agreement, will have to be effectively answered.

The diplomats are to be congratulated. They have achieved more than most experts had considered likely, and insofar as they are genuinely making progress toward a peaceful and effective resolution of the Iranian nuclear question, that is certainly to be welcomed. No responsible or rational power has any interest in a dangerous and destabilizing military confrontation between Iran and the United States over nuclear weapons. It is strongly in the interests of regional, and indeed global, stability and security that such issues are resolved at the negotiating table. However, it remains essential to unpack the strengths and weaknesses of the framework and to dispassionately evaluate its political, diplomatic, and strategic implications.

The framework achieves a real reduction in the assets and capabilities of Iran's nuclear program for the first time following a decade of numerous failed efforts. About two-thirds of Iran's centrifuges will be mothballed for at least 15 years. The country's stockpile of low-enriched uranium will be significantly reduced. Enrichment will be greatly restrained, and carried out far below weapons-grade status, no greater than 3.67 percent. For the next 15 years, Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium will be limited to 300 kg. The Arak heavy-water reactor will also be effectively removed from weapons-grade fuel production, and its main reactor dismantled and replaced. Nonetheless, President Barack Obama's assessment that the framework agreement will "cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon" seems optimistic, or at least premature.

Some of the concerns about the framework involve details that must be clarified in a broader agreement, which is scheduled to be reached by June 30. Key aspects of the inspection and verification regime remain either unresolved or undisclosed. It's not clear whether Iran and the P5+1 share a

common understanding of how the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's 1997 "Additional Protocol" for International Atomic Energy Agency inspections (which Iran has promised to re-affirm) might apply in this case, or how intrusive they can be. But clearly they fall far short of the "anywhere, anytime" regime of inspections and access to facilities and personnel that applied to Iraq during the 1990s, for example. For skeptics, details of the inspection, monitoring, and verification protocol will be among the most important issues to be clarified in the broader agreement, or otherwise before June 30.

Other concerns, however, appear to be hardwired into the framework itself. The broadest of these is that the agreement does not appear to ensure that Iran will never become a nuclear power. Instead, key aspects of its program will be placed on hold for 10, or in some cases 15, years. After that, many of the most important of the restrictions will simply expire. The framework could therefore be viewed as postponing rather than resolving the largest of the big-picture issues. In the meanwhile, Iran will, in fact, continue to enrich uranium with at least 5,000 actively working centrifuges. None of its facilities, or its 19,000 existing centrifuges, will actually be dismantled. Reaching the agreement required significant adjustments in the Obama administration's earlier parameters for an acceptable deal. Nonetheless, the administration probably did achieve most of what it was looking for, at least at this stage. Additional progress is to be encouraged, and the specifics of the framework potentially allow for that.

Perhaps the most significant questions, however, lie beyond the specifics of the framework, and even the nuclear negotiations as such. Rather, they involve growing concerns among traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East about the potential for a broad restructuring of U.S. policy in the region and/or the reordering of the balance of power, particularly in the Gulf. These concerns have arisen from both U.S. words and deeds.

U.S. policies, such as Washington's unwillingness to maintain a strong or consistent stance regarding the future of the Iranian-allied dictatorship in Syria, have suggested to some observers an unwarranted deference to Iranian interests. Assuming that there is a link between U.S. policy toward Syria and perceived Iranian sensitivities, they could be explained simply by according the nuclear negotiations primacy over all other concerns. However, they could also be understood as reflecting a desire for a far broader rapprochement between Washington and Tehran that involves a new acquiescence to Iranian spheres of influence and regional hegemony at best, or at worst a strategic partnership between the two parties without a significant change in Iran's regional attitudes.

Some administration rhetoric has not helped. Comments by Obama and other senior administration officials, including suggestions that Iran might be a particularly "rational" Middle Eastern actor as opposed to other regional powers, particularly Sunni Arab societies, raised many eyebrows. Rightly or wrongly, concerns have spread that the Obama administration is actively seeking to shift the U.S. strategic alignment in the region toward Iran and its sectarian allies, or to create a new "balance" between what could crudely or reductively be described as either "Sunni vs. Shia," or even "Arab vs. Persian-led," alliances.

These perceptions are stressors for U.S. relations with traditional allies in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf region. The nuclear framework agreement is likely to strongly exacerbate these anxieties. Not only may several key players in the region feel ever-less inclined to rely on Washington's assurances, damaging U.S. interests and the ability to successfully pursue its policy goals, if they perceive the

nuclear agreement as insufficient, they may begin to consider their own need for strategic deterrence. Anxiety and uncertainty are surefire recipes for regional instability, tensions, and an invigorated arms race with alarming added dimensions.

The timing of the framework agreement with Iran is particularly sensitive but not coincidental, especially given that a Saudi-led Arab coalition has recently launched a sustained intervention in Yemen against the Iranian-supported Houthi militia that has been making significant gains in its effort to seize power throughout the country. The intervention has involved the creation of a joint Arab military force, prompted by the expansion of Iran's influence and hegemony through allies, clients, and proxies. The battle in Yemen is only the most dramatic and explicit manifestation of a growing direct military confrontation between Iranian-supported and Arab regional forces on numerous fronts throughout the region.

Progress in the negotiations with Iran and the growing confrontation between Tehran and a Saudi-led Arab coalition are strongly linked. Arab (and Israeli, and to some extent Turkish, as well) anxieties about Iran's regional role are exacerbated by the potential that successful nuclear negotiations have for easing economic pressure on Iran, enriching its coffers, and strengthening its ability to bankroll its numerous and often effective clients. At least as alarming are fears that a nuclear accommodation could at last secure the reintegration of Iran into the international community as an empowered and respected actor, but crucially without any adjustment in Iran's regional policies, merely a deal regarding its nuclear program. This prospect suggests a kind of quid pro quo in which many of Iran's other ambitions would be accommodated as long as its nuclear program is put into a deep freeze over the next 10 to 15 years. Even if such fears are exaggerated or misplaced, significant effort will be required to dispel them.

Obama implicitly acknowledged this delicate regional strategic context in his remarks announcing the Iran framework agreement, particularly through his commitment to invite the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to Camp David this spring to "further strengthen our security cooperation." Obama pointedly stated that he had already had a telephone conversation about the situation with King Salman of Saudi Arabia, and would get around to consulting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sometime later in the day.

There is much the United States can and should do to assuage these concerns. Washington does not lack the means or opportunities to express, and, much more importantly, practically demonstrate, the strength of its commitment to long-standing alliances that are based on deep-seated shared interests and not caprice or tradition. The Camp David meeting is a welcome initiative, but it can and should be buttressed by other diplomatic, defense, and intelligence cooperation.

The challenges are regional, and therefore the responses should be based on multilateral Middle Eastern strategic considerations. The GCC-U.S. Strategic Cooperation Forum's fourth ministerial meeting in September 2014 was based on, but went beyond, the common fight in Iraq and Syria against militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Building on that meeting, and in the context of the present unease, much more progress on returning to earlier patterns of consistent consultation and coordination should be well within reach. The developing return of closer relations between the United States and Egypt, with the recent restoration of U.S. military assistance, is a further example of the strengthening of ties with traditional Arab allies that is reassuring on a regional basis.

The GCC in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, is going to be playing a more assertive regional role, one that is presently characterized by rivalry with Iran.

In this context Egypt and Saudi Arabia have combined to lead the establishment by the Arab League of a joint Arab military force. At a minimum, this move underscores the emerging Saudi-Egyptian axis in the Middle East and reflects a new willingness on the part of Arab states to act militarily in their own interests rather than simply waiting for the United States to take the lead in every crisis. The ongoing Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, Egyptian attacks against extremists in Libya, U.S.-led attacks on ISIL in Iraq and Syria with Arab support and participation, and even the 2011 GCC action in Bahrain, all suggest a determination by pro-U.S. Arab states to cooperate and act in their own interests, including to curb the expanding power of Iran and its clients. Both diplomatic and practical U.S. support, within reason and in the U.S. national interest, for this Arab assertiveness might well be the most effective and convincing means of communicating Washington's determination to preserve and even strengthen its relations with its Arab allies as it simultaneously pursues an agreement with Iran on the nuclear file, and perhaps even a new relationship with Tehran altogether. This is a circle that – with sufficient resources, skill, and determination, and with a reciprocal commitment from the Arab states – can indeed be squared.

Clarity on U.S. policy toward Syria, and particularly the future of the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad, would not only strengthen the U.S. position more broadly, it would be a crucial gesture in dispelling the notion that the United States is carefully crafting its policies to accommodate an expanded interpretation of Iran's legitimate interests in the region. At a November 16, 2014 press conference Obama was asked whether the administration was considering ways of removing Assad as part of a plan for political transition in Syria. He replied with a curt, "No." Dispelling the impression that the United States is no longer committed to the removal of Assad is not optional if strong relations with Arab allies are to be fully restored. It is essential. The struggle to "degrade" and ultimately "destroy" ISIL is similarly dependent on policy clarity on Syria that emphasizes U.S. opposition to the continued rule of the Assad dictatorship, despite Iran's interest in maintaining it.

It is essential that the United States act quickly to forestall any possibility that the nuclear framework adds to the impression that U.S. policies tend to inexplicably comfort enemies and alarm friends. This is especially urgent since a successful negotiated resolution to the problem of Iran's nuclear program is in everybody's interests, whereas a conflict over it serves no rational or responsible actor. But if such an agreement is to avoid creating new problems or exacerbating old ones, and potentially even doing more harm than good, it is essential that crucial, long-standing strategic alliances are protected and reinforced. Traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East require and deserve persuasive reassurance that progress on nuclear negotiations with Iran will not come at their expense, and that, if a broader agreement with Iran is achieved, they, too, will be beneficiaries.