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THE WEST AND IRAN AFTER LAUSANNE: NUCLEAR AGREEMENT POSSIBLE, YET DISAGREEMENTS ON MIDDLE EAST REMAIN

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In spite of the joint declaration made by Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on 2 April 2015, concerning a breakthrough in the negotiations over Iran's controversial nuclear programme, a 'deal' has not yet been done. Before a final agreement can be signed by the end of June, a number of sensitive and difficult technical and legal problems have to be solved. Furthermore, there is resistance to the deal on the part of some of the Israeli elite and various circles in the United States, as well as Iranian extremists. However, an agreement may also fail due to diverging views on the Islamic Republic of Iran's role in the Middle East region.

Ever since the 1970s, Iran has laid claim to the status of a regional power, dominating the Persian Gulf region and reaching out into the Levant. Its ambitions have changed little under the Islamic Republic, except that Shi'ite Iran became adamant about overcoming its isolation from the Sunni-Arab world with ideological help, namely by utilising revolutionary and therefore inter-confessional Islamism as a common political language with the Arab world. Supporting the Palestinian cause, which is tantamount to fighting against Israel, is the main objective of Islamism.

It was within the framework of this logic that Iran started to support or to set up radical groups, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and later Hamas; or Hezbollah in Lebanon. The alliance with Syria in the First Gulf War (1980-88) was purely strategic in nature, since it was directed against Iraq. After the protracted war, Tehran found a new ideological-political framework for its partners and allies: the so-called 'axis of resistance'.

Formally directed against Israel, this axis simultaneously united the most important Arab opponents of Saudi Arabia.

Competition with Saudi Arabia

Apart from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the dispute over Iranian and Saudi spheres of influence is the most important strategic constant in the Middle East. The strategic competition between these two Gulf neighbours intensified after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. However, both sides avoided direct confrontation, despite Tehran's (futile) attempts to incite the Shi'ites in the Gulf Region and in Saudi Arabia against their rulers, and the Saudis' occasional support for radical groups among Iranian Sunnis, who make up an estimated 35 per cent of Iran's population. As a rule, both sides limited themselves to propaganda and diplomatic skirmishes.

From the Saudi viewpoint, the USA undid the delicate power balance in the region to Iran's advantage when it unseated their two arch enemies, namely the Sunni Taliban in Afgha-

nistan in 2001, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. With the end of Saddam Hussein, pan-Arab nationalism, a secular ideology, ended too, and was gradually replaced by 'confessionalism', i.e. the dichotomy of the two branches of Islam, Shia and Sunna.

American attempts at democratising authoritarian regimes in the region displeased Saudi Arabia in particular. Its elites equated democratisation with Shiitisation and, not without reason, viewed this as a further strengthening of Iran's position in the region. When in 2006, after Israel's 33-Day-War against Hezbollah, Tehran's prestige in the Arab world was at its height, the Kingdom felt compelled to react. Back then, Riyadh warned both the international community and the Arab public of a 'Shiite Crescent', allegedly spanning an arc from Tehran, through Bagdad, Damascus and Lebanon to Palestine.

The overthrow of the Egyptian President Mubarak and the protests in Bahrain in 2011 further aggravated the situation. The events in Bahrain were especially dangerous for Riyadh, because eastern Saudi-Arabian political activists declared their solidarity with their Shiite brethren. Both, Saudi-Arabia's intervention in Bahrain, and its support for General Sisi, a secularist, against the politically inexperienced Muslim Brotherhood Government in Egypt, are to be seen against this backdrop. In both cases, Saudi-Arabia, from its viewpoint, intervened at the very last minute, before Tehran was able to firmly establish a foothold in Cairo or Manama.

In the course of its efforts to limit Iranian influence in the region, Riyadh was only able to contain Iranian influence by playing the 'confessional card' recklessly, and thus discrediting Iran and its ambitions in the eyes of the predominantly Sunni Arab world. Even so, Saudi diplomacy was quite disconcerted to realize that the Western States were negotiating with the Islamic Republic on an equal footing, giving the impression of tacitly acquiescing to Iran's hegemonic designs in the region.

Iran on the nuclear threshold

Iran's nuclear programme should substantiate Tehran's claim to regional leadership in two ways: on the one hand by prevailing over Saudi Arabia in the struggle for influence and prestige in the region, and on the other by containing Israel. Both objectives can easily be reached by not going all out for a nuclear arms device, but maintaining the necessary technological capabilities whilst adhering to the Non-Proliferation-Treaty (NPT).

Such a policy of restraint offers some obvious strategic advantages: without actually possessing nuclear arms, the Islamic Republic would still be capable of producing them, and hence it would have the status of a 'virtual nuclear power' or a 'nuclear threshold power'. In relation to the region, this would mean that the Islamic Republic could be treated as a nuclear power in its own right. It is certainly true that a successfully concluded agreement would limit Iran's nuclear technological capabilities and subject it to strict IAEA oversight. Even so, Teheran would legally retain its technical core competences. Limited to the global level and international legal aspects, such a result could rightfully be seen as a win-win-situation – or at least a face-saving solution – for both sides the E3+3 negotiators and the Islamic Republic of Iran. From the viewpoint of Iran's principal contenders Israel and Saudi Arabia, such an outcome would be unacceptable for various reasons.

Neither Iran's current nuclear programme, nor its even more restrained post-agreement nuclear programme, poses any direct military threat to Israel. However, it puts Tel Aviv in a hazardous diplomatic dilemma: since Iran adheres to the NPT and grants access to IAEA inspectors, international diplomatic pressure on Israel to join the NPT as well will increase dramatically. This would then intensify even more, since the EU and important pro-Western Arab states have been supporting various disarmament initiatives in the Middle East for years; among others, they promoted a 'Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone' in the

Middle East. Iran is an enthusiastic supporter of regional nuclear disarmament, including the said WMD-free zone – as is only logical, given its strategic benefits for Iran. After all, if the agreement were to be concluded, the disadvantages would be on Israel's side: Iran would retain its *nuclear capability*, yet Israel would have to declare its *nuclear arsenal* and, subsequently, if international pressure mounted, even have to reduce it or give it up altogether.

The only way for Israel to prevent such a development is to torpedo the nuclear agreement by presenting Iran as a major nuclear threat to world peace. Israeli PR specialists were quite successful insofar as, during the first years of the nuclear negotiations, they succeeded in raising European public awareness of Iran's – real or presumed – threat. Yet they were unable to impede the negotiations and nowadays sound alarmist and less credible. Tehran's more moderate political language under president Rouhani and the intensification of inter-confessional wars in Iraq and Syria make Iran appear as a moderate and responsible state in the region. Thus the Government in Tel Aviv has to ask itself how much its aggressive rhetoric has damaged Israel's own credibility rather than Iran's.

Escalation over Syria

For a long time, Tehran strictly refused to see the events that were unfolding in the region through a confessional lens. Decision-makers and analysts adhered to the Supreme Leader's interpretation of the Arab Spring as a series of Islamic Revolutions, the outcome of which would ultimately benefit Iran. At the latest towards the end of 2013, this was not tenable anymore. In the previous years (2011-2012), Tehran had made half-hearted efforts to reach out to the Syrian opposition. When these attempts failed – partly because they hadn't tried hard enough and partly due to pressure exerted by the Saudis and others, the only option remaining to Iran was to support Assad until his eventual victory – or his bitter end. That is why Teheran pushed its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah to participate in the Syrian civil war on the

regime's side, even while Iranian-trained Hamas fighters were fighting among the ranks of the radical Sunni opposition, making a mockery of Iran's inter-confessional regional policy.

As a matter of fact, Tehran did not have any other choice but to accept a confessional reading of the conflicts. The Iranians even took on board all the Saudi-Arabian allegations, interpreted them in a positive way and used them in their own propaganda. Henceforth, Saudi-Arabian and international newspaper articles on the extent of Iranian influence on the Shiites in the region were quoted at great length. Even the Houthis in Yemen, a Shiite Zaidi group that had hardly anything in common with the Iranian Shia, were claimed by Tehran.

In reality, Iran has always been weakly positioned in Yemen, even if there has been loose contact with some groups over the years. Experts are still debating how much Yemen figures in Tehran's regional strategy. The decision to provide arms to the Houthis is to be attributed to the circumstances rather than to a long-term strategy. It is quite the contrary in Iraq, where Tehran has had its networks build up Shiite militias within the Iraqi security forces since 2014. In the context of the raging battles in Syria and Iraq, the role of the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Major General Qasem Soleimani, is repeatedly emphasised both by Iranian and international media. Success is proving Tehran right: under Iranian leadership, the Iraqis are fighting back against the 'Islamic State', while Syrian government forces have managed to hold their positions with the help of Iranian support. Thus Tehran has succeeded in squaring the circle: the Iranians have met their own national security requirements, e.g. by fighting the 'Islamic State', and at the same time maintained their regional sphere of influence.

Differing views on the region

The situation in Iraq and Syria illustrates the gap between Western and Iranian concepts of order for the region: Iran is granted the free-

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dom to pursue its legitimate security interests in neighbouring Iraq, as long as its efforts are directed against the common enemy IS. In Syria, however, the positions are irreconcilable in relation to the continuance or ousting of Assad, who is responsible for most of the civilian victims. The positive media coverage in the West (and occasional diplomatic upgrading) of the Syrian PKK offshoot Democratic Union Party or PYD (e.g. in the course of the fighting for Kobani), which has proven its worth in combating IS, is directed toward Tehran and Damascus and is intended to qualify the 'common ground' between Iran and the West in the fight against IS.

Temporary spells of American-Iranian cooperation in Iraq are therefore nothing but episodes in a region already rich in conflicting alliances. Developments in Iraq already contain the seeds of a collapse of the tacit acquiescence between Tehran and Washington, because the US may accept the replacement of the Iraqi army by pro-Iranian Shiite militias as an emergency measure for a while, but not as a permanent solution. Cooperation is most likely to be feasible when the international community need to rely on Tehran's aid as the mediator of a truce in Syria. But right now this is out of question. And even if this were the case, Hezbollah's role would still be unsolved. In other words: with or without a nuclear agreement, the Western countries are still on the side of Saudi Arabia and Israel, although this relationship is an uneasy one at times.

Consequences of a nuclear agreement

A successful nuclear arrangement would be binding for future Iranian governments and could be exemplary for other emerging nuclear states. At the same time, it confronts the region, but also the EU and the USA, with a new strategic situation requiring new answers.

a) An agreement would certainly have an impact on *Saudi Arabia's position*. The smaller Gulf States would not completely leave the Saudi-Arabian sphere of influence, yet they would be forced, out of self-interest,

to take Tehran's position into account more than before.

- b) It would establish *nuclear parity with Israel* and relativise Israel's deterrence potential. This would render other strategic factors for Israel more relevant, such as the small size of the country, the political isolation from the Arab world and the unresolved Palestine issue.
- c) It would allow Tehran to pursue its *claim to regional hegemony* more confidently and aggressively. Although this is not to be expected at the moment, one has to bear in mind that the current political leaders will retire in the years to come, only to be replaced by a more radical generation from the war generation.
- d) For the EU, an agreement would at first be a diplomatic success. In view of the changed situation, a new strategy paper for a bilateral Euro-Iranian relationship could be formulated, in which other core topics, such as European energy security, regional security and human rights are also taken into account and discussed.
- e) The USA will have to weigh up carefully which impact the arrangement with Iran will have on the regional level. This requires finding the right balance between support for its allies Israel and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and de-escalation with Iran on the other. On both sides, Washington will have to answer the question as to how much Iranian influence on the region the US is willing to accept, and how this dovetails with its own political vision for the region.

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