

The Nuclear Deal Was Not for Mending Frayed Iran-US Relations

Written by Mohammed Nuruzzaman

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MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN, MAR 21 2016

Tensions are on the rise in Iran – US relations once again, contrary to hopes for better ties created by the nuclear deal inked in July 2015. Iran's test-firing of ballistic missiles, not the nuclear program itself, is the contentious issue this time. The US sees ballistic missile launch, assumed to be nuclear capable, as a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1929 that bars Iran from developing and launching any such missiles. Iran says the missile program is a part of its deterrent power against external threats, including from the US, and not a violation of the deal.

The new tensions over Iran's missile program are, in fact, symptoms of deeper conflicts and ruptures in Iran – US relations, taking roots since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The nuclear deal was a marriage of convenience between the two countries to avoid another war in the already war-ravaged Middle East and jointly face the specter of common threats posed by the Sunni militants, not a political and diplomatic instrument to cultivate cool relations between Tehran and Washington. President Obama candidly admitted that he did not 'anticipate any time in the near future restored normal diplomatic relations with Iran'. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed a similar view, perhaps more crudely: 'We have announced that we will not negotiate with the Americans on any issue other than the nuclear case'.

The nuclear deal has primarily sought to curb, but not permanently roll back, Iran's nuclear program, in exchange for sanctions relief. It did not address the deep strategic and political divergences between the two countries. Mutually sworn enemies for over three decades, Iran has sought security guarantees against the US by claiming a preeminent position in the Gulf neighborhood, if not the entire Middle East region. Its sense of insecurity heightened after US troop presence all around its national border following US military assaults first on Afghanistan in early October 2001 and thereafter on Iraq in March 2003 under the rubric of 'war on terror,' unleashed by the 9/11 attacks. America's deepening strategic ties with the anti-Iran Gulf Arab allies created extra pressures on Tehran. All such issues apparently remained outside the parameters of the nuclear deal and they ratchet up tensions on and off.

Equally acute are the political divergences between Iran and the US. Whereas the US is a secular open democracy, Iran represents a theocratic model, blending both elected and unelected institutions. The model of Islamic government, headed by the Office of *Faqih* (commonly called the Supreme Leader), the late Ayatollah Khomeini established in 1979, has survived in the face of major odds, by defying US dominance, internal dissensions and the general post-cold war secular democratic surge worldwide. The nuclear deal, directly or indirectly, recognizes the Iranian model of Islamic government but Iranian officials are wary of US machinations to bring down their Islamic government. The influential sites in Iranian power structure – especially the Supreme Leader and the powerful Revolutionary Guards interpret Western media influence, cultural penetrations and cyberattacks as the West's 'soft power' war to undermine the Islamic government from within Iran. Khamenei and other conservative leaders have often called on the Iranians to resist Western cultural penetrations, what they refer to as a 'cultural NATO'.

Deep political and strategic divergences notwithstanding, both the Rouhani government and the Obama administration agreed in principle to find a *modus operandi* to deal with the nuclear issue. The immediate compelling reason for both to cooperate was the rising new menace – the Islamic State (IS). Equally repugnant to the Westerners, especially the Americans, and the Shi'as across the Middle East, the IS directly threatens regional

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security, and challenges the post-Second World War territorial arrangements in the Middle East, effected by the Sykes – Picot Agreement of May 1916. The IS's control over a large swathe across the Iraq – Syria border negates the colonially drawn political map of the region. The survival of the IS holds the potential to entirely destroy the regional political and security order.

For Iran, there was a host of other powerful reasons to negotiate – the most important being the need to get the devastating sanctions lifted. President Rouhani had the blessings of the Supreme Leader to accomplish this and reintegrate the largely isolated Iranian economy into the global economy. For the US, Iran's support was essential to contain the IS menace. Iraq is a common ally of both countries and the fall of Baghdad could be a humiliating defeat for both of them. Cooperation with Iran also broadly fit the US policy of gradual disengagement from the Middle East, a policy the Obama administration is pursuing to focus more on other strategically important regions like East Asia. Indeed, President Obama's Iran diplomacy has more or less contributed to the so-called 'Obama doctrine' – diplomacy first, war last.

The signing of the nuclear deal, to put it in definitive terms, was driven by some immediate interests of Iran as well as the US, leaving behind the deep strategic and political differences unaddressed. That means Iran – US relations would remain susceptible to more tensions and ruptures in future. The reformists' recent electoral gains in the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body that elects and guides the Supreme Leader, are unlikely to yield positive changes in Iran's relations with the US, since the hardline conservatives are in control of the more influential bases of power – the Office of the *Faqih* and Council of Guardians that vets the candidates for elections and puts a check on the parliament by approving or rejecting laws passed by it.

About the author:

Mohammed Nuruzzaman is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), Kuwait. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Alberta in 2003 and has taught at different universities in Canada, Bangladesh, and Kuwait. Dr. Nuruzzaman specializes in international relations theory, global political economy, human rights and human security, great powers in the global order, political Islam, and politics and international relations of the Middle East. His major publications have appeared in leading peer-reviewed international journals, including *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *International Studies Perspectives*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, *International Studies*, *International Area Studies Review*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, and *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, among others. He is also a contributor to influential global news magazines and online publication outlets, including *The National Interest*, *E-International Relations*, *The Conversation*, and *Informed Comments*. Winner of some prestigious scholarships and fellowships, including Durham Senior International Research Fellowship 2016 – 17, KFAS (Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences) research grants in 2013, the F.S. Chia Doctoral Scholarships (University of Alberta) in 1998, and the GUST – UMSL Summer Research Fellowship in 2011, his current research more focuses on contemporary Middle Eastern security issues.