

Nuclear Deal with Iran: Worth It or Not?

Written by Mostafa Mousavipour

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MOSTAFA MOUSAVIPOUR, NOV 23 2014

The drumbeat of a nuclear deal with Iran has reached a crescendo, however, there has so far been no considerable headway in resolving this long-standing standoff once and for all, as the negotiating sides are still widely divided over the key issues. As many are weighing up the potential gains of striking a deal with Tehran against the probable risks, it seems that reaching an agreement at the current juncture would not be as dangerous as some skeptics would argue, particularly against the backdrop of the dynamics in the Middle East and the Black Sea region, and the unfolding geopolitical and strategic alignments and quarrels in the wake.

While the negotiated deadline of 24 November is coming to an end, the hopes for a comprehensive deal between the P5+1 (the U.S., Russia, China, England, France, plus Germany) and Iran are fast fading with no major breakthrough in the offing. As averred by a top Iranian negotiator after the recent Muscat negotiation on 9-10 November 2014, the resolution of the nuclear issue is still shrouded in uncertainty, with the negotiating sides both trying to stand their ground and not giving in. The Vienna talks on 18-24 November have once more rendered as incompatible the positions of the bargaining sides. For Iran, anything less than an all-out removal of sanctions would spell defeat, while the P5+1 group, mainly under U.S. pressure, would opt for a gradual ease of restrictions and insist on capping Iran's nuclear activities as a means to guarantee the country will not become a nuclear state.

Apart from these irreconcilable demands, there are other major factors that are adamantly opposed to such a deal with Iran. Regional Arab rivals, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, would not admit a nuclear Shia country in their immediate vicinity. Similarly for Israel, a nuclear-armed Iran would be an existential threat. To cap it all, the U.S. Congress, where the GOP (Republicans) now rules the roost would never let Tehran get away with a nuclear trophy, particularly given the heightened GOP and AIPAC anti-Iran approach. In a similar vein, the hardliners in Tehran – not to mention the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei – have been doubtful about the nature of the talks and have assertively expressed their dissatisfaction with the course of the negotiations. Any single concession would be instantly frowned upon as a weakness and would thus be out of the question. As a result, the talks still remain deadlocked.

However, there are sufficiently strong reasons at national, regional, and international levels that would point to the advisability of a settlement with Iran. This argument will find meaning in the context of first the declining popularity of both Rouhani and Obama in their respective countries, and then the highly unpredictable Middle East and the Black Sea region dynamics.

First, Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani both came to power under roughly similar circumstances. Both succeeded hardliners on a platform of moderation with pledges to change the situation and reverse the vices of the previous administration. Both presidents had to deal with legacies handed down to them after eight years of imprudent brinkmanship under their respective predecessors. And so far, both have fallen short of fully realizing their campaign goals and fulfilling their much-touted agendas. Obama's debacle in his "reset with Russia", his mishandling of the crises in the Middle East, and his shortcoming in stemming the rise of China on the one hand, and his domestic social and welfare policies on the other hand, have all contributed to his rising unpopularity. In a similar vein, Rouhani's initial popularity has all but fizzled out due to his failure to remedy manifold problems in Iran and make good on his campaign pledges. Therefore, the protracted nuclear negotiations could be further conducive to both Obama and Rouhani's loss of face.

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Second, following the 2013 interim deal and the partial ease of sanctions, Tehran has been re-engaging with the world in pragmatic/constructive interactions. This, in fact, has been the centerpiece of Rouhani's foreign policy. Therefore, in a bid to hedge Iran's bets, Rouhani has taken initiatives to diversify and expand the economic and trade ties, as well as security cooperation. Although the problems linger at home, the diplomatic relations have taken an upswing in the region and beyond, following the friendly overtures to the regional Persian Gulf rivals and steps taken to create transparency regarding the nuclear issue. Moreover, Tehran's increasing involvement in regional and Asian security-economic pacts such as SCO and CICA can make it possible for the country to circumvent the sanctions and break away from isolation. This gravitation to the east and the likelihood of Iran gaining full membership in the SCO, at a time when the expansion of this organization is high on Moscow's agenda, would prove "a geopolitical game changer" and a blow to the U.S., particularly against the backdrop of the *realpolitik* tug in the Black Sea region and the promotion of an anti-imperialist bloc at Moscow's behest.

Third, as for the Middle East, Tehran, by many accounts, is a fundamental lever for stability and security. Obama's recent secret letter sent to Ayatollah Khamenei bears witness to the fact that resolution of the Middle East complicated security conundrums with Iran's help and cooperation would be much easier for the American-led anti-ISIL coalition. Iran's foreign policy in the region regarding Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine could be a major spoiler for the American campaign goals. With the Iranian Revolutionary Guard expanding its sphere of influence in the region, thanks to the formidable Quds Force and its leader General Qassem Suleimani – the rising star in Iraq's battlefields who has so far received the accolade for beating the ISIL and liberating Erbil, Amerli, Dhuluiya, and Jurf al-Sakhr – Iran can surely play a fundamental role should the U.S. wish to stem the tide of the militancy in the Middle East. Further American lopsided policies in favor of Iran's regional Arab rivals can only escalate the sectarian tensions in the Middle East, as Yemen and Bahrain have become another scene for the Saudi-Iranian antagonism that underlies many of the region's crises.

A nuclear deal with Iran at this juncture, although convoluted due to multiple forces standing in the way, would go a long way toward restoring the faith in both presidents, as it could be a rare legacy after 35 years of strained relations. It would also temper harsh anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric rife in hardliner's camp in Iran, and would be instrumental in easing the political and security tensions in the Middle East. Furthermore, the evolving geopolitical gravitation toward Russia could be interpreted as a major strategic blow to the U.S., as it would tilt the power politics scale eastward. If the nuclear standoff persists, Tehran's policies and tactical and strategic positioning will not only not furnish the U.S. and the West's interests, but instead will raise the stakes for them in the region and the wider world.

If there should ever be an opportunity for the U.S. and Iran to shed the entrenched anti-each-other sloganeering and meet halfway as a viable means to laying the groundwork for meaningful relations, it is worth giving it a try now. Because the rise of the GOP in the Congress and its likely victory in the next presidential election will undo all diplomatic attempts and dash all the hopes.

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