

The US-Iran Deal and the Outcome

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November 28, 2013

The US-Iran secret parleys began some time in 2011. Initially, it was about agreeing to talk, where and who will meet. John Kerry as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had started the spade work and visited Oman seeking assistance from Sultan Qaboos. In June 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected President of Iran and assumed office in August. Two meetings took place in Muscat that month, which was communicated by President Obama to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when they met on September 30th in the White House. This, of course, was not news for Netanyahu as he was already informed by the Saudis of the parleys. When the French foreign minister Laurent Fabius stood in the way of a deal in the last but one meeting in Geneva, it showed his irritation that crucial negotiations were taking place elsewhere and the foreign ministers were presented with solutions already arrived at. But, France could only show irritation and not prevent a deal.

The point to note is that though the deal is only about nuclear issues, it significantly marks the opening of a meaningful and serious dialogue between US and Iran, once treated as a part of the “Axis of Evil” by President George Bush. However, Obama has been willing to treat Iran as an equal interlocutor and Iran, suffering under sanctions, has responded. In the secret talks the US raised the question of Iran’s military involvement in Syria. It is not known what the Iranian response was but now that the UN has announced a meeting on Syria in Geneva on January 22, it has to be seen whether Iran will be invited. Importantly it has to be seen whether there might be opposition from Saudi Arabia.

But let us go back in history and pick the threads of US-Iran relations. In 1953, a bloodless democratic revolution in Iran brought Mosaddeq to power and the Shah fled to Rome. The UK wanted military intervention as Mosaddeq moved to nationalize the oil industry. President Eisenhower had counseled caution and finally, the CIA arranged a coup, at a cost of about \$ 10,000 and reinstated the Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who later was overthrown by Khomeini in the revolution of 1979. The US Embassy was taken over by the militant followers of Khomeini in protest against President Carter’s decision to grant political asylum to the Shah. The Secretary of State and the embassy in Tehran had advised Carter not to do that. The hostage crisis lasted 444 days. If Carter had not taken that decision, the course of US-Iran relations might have been different. The misjudgment eventually cost Carter his re-election.

Back to the present and another important point is that by concluding the deal with Iran, despite Israel’s objection, Obama has clearly demonstrated that there are limits to Israel’s ability to influence and shape US policy. Israel’s repeated threats to carry out military

strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities without US support need to be taken with a pinch of salt. In 1981, Israel carried out a successful strike against a nuclear facility in Iraq built with French assistance, which it was later disclosed by the French scientists that the facility was not equipped to make weapon grade material. Incidentally, Iran had carried out a clumsy bombing of Osirak earlier on the urging of Israeli intelligence.

The deal might appear to be lopsided as Iran is getting only minimal relief from sanctions while it has made major concessions. It is still not known what the road ahead is. What, however, is clear is that if Iran fulfills what it has agreed then there will be no case for not lifting the sanctions. The public debate between the US and Iran over its right to enrichment is only meant for public consumption. The deal does say that Iran should not enrich beyond 5 per cent. In any case, the Security Council resolutions directing Iran to cease enrichment of uranium are deeply flawed. Iran is a signatory to the NPT which does assert the right to peaceful use of nuclear technology to every signatory state. It is elementary physics that enrichment up to a point is necessary for industrial and research purposes. It is only because Iran was treated as a pariah state that the US-dominated Security Council passed those untenable resolutions.

For Saudi Arabia the turn of events are upsetting. Its opposition to any deal, short of total surrender by Iran, was repeatedly conveyed to the US. How will the US-Saudi relations be affected by the deal? Saudi Arabia is passing through a difficult period of time with an aging ruler and a leadership crisis. The refusal to take the Security Council seat was an indication of the discord within the House of Sa'ud. Riyadh has also been angry over Washington for not having taken military action on Syria. If the deal works and if the sanctions are lifted, Iran's regional clout will increase at the cost of Saudi Arabia. Already there are reports about Saudi Arabia getting a nuclear weapon from Pakistan if Iran develops one. However, there is no reason to believe that the US will dump Saudi Arabia and build up Iran as its central ally in the region. If the Saudi-Iran confrontation escalates, the US might do some mediation and peacekeeping. Further, it can also be expected that if the deal helps to broaden and strengthen the relations with Iran, the US will significantly increase its clout in the region.

As regards Israel, its security is not going to be compromised by the deal. Logically, if Iran is prevented from making a bomb, Israel should feel secure. Therefore, there is an apparent contradiction in Israel's public stand. Not to forget, the US is always there to guarantee Israel's security. But Israel's ability to control and manipulate US policy through the pro-Israeli lobby has been seriously damaged. Some Republicans and even Democrats might refuse to lift the sanctions but once Iran delivers, it will be difficult to make out a case for continuing with the sanctions.

The deal might have implications for the geopolitics of energy. European Union is heavily energy dependent on Russia and would want to reduce it over time. Apart from Russia, both Iran and Qatar have significant gas deposits. Will Iran, one day export gas to EU through Turkey or otherwise? South Pars is a gas field shared between Iran and Qatar and if both the countries join hands they can export huge amounts of gas to EU. On the other hand, such a development will reduce Russia's income from gas and its political clout.

For India, the deal is a welcome development while others have expressed that there is not much in it as the sanctions on oil trade remain. Be that as it may, Iran has moved fast by sending a Deputy Minister to brief India on the deal.

Both the US and Iran have acted wisely to their benefit as well as to the relief of the world. The onus now will be on Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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