

The Iran-GCC Balance Sheet after the Nuclear Agreement

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The Islamic Republic of Iran has finally signed the long-awaited agreement with the P5+1 group of nations that would ensure the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. The United Nations Security Council has also ratified Resolution 2231(2015), ending a twenty-one month arduous process that brought Iran in from the cold despite the maneuvers, false hopes, broken promises, and contradictory statements from the myriad corners of decision-making that influence the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

Long before the signing and immediately afterwards, regional and international actors and powers became clearly identifiable in two different categories. The first contained those believing that Iran will use the agreement to foment disorder while the second included those doubting that it will jeopardize its newest opening unto the world. But however positively or negatively may the July 14 agreement affect Iran's actions in the future, the Islamic Republic will from here onward receive more scrutiny and face increasing challenges from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council which are invested in the task of safeguarding the peace, stability, and security of their region.

Old – and Renewable – Files

Iran's regional role has for a long time been a bane for its region. It has supplied weapons, recruits, and materiel to the Syrian regime against a popular uprising, allowed its proxy Hezbollah to nearly strangle political life in Lebanon, controlled national political life in Iraq, and defended illegal activities by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Indeed, as the leader of Shiite power in the region, the Islamic Republic has fomented sectarian divisions and fanned religious factional fires to the detriment of peaceful relations with its neighbors and good overall conditions for regional socio-economic development. In all of these countries and beyond, the countries of the GCC find that they need to remain vigilant, resolute, and firm, notwithstanding the international community's need to reach a comprehensive deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program.

Syria

Almost four and half years of civil strife in Syria – originally made so by a ruthless response to peaceful demonstrations – have yet to convince the Iranian leadership of the folly of supporting a dying regime. Tehran's political, economic, and military support, and that of its loyal militias in Lebanon and Iraq, to the Bashar al-Assad regime has only resulted in the death and injury of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, the dislocation and impoverishment of over ten million others, and the physical and psychological destruction of the Syrian nation and state.

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The fear after the much-vaunted nuclear agreement is that Iran would feel emboldened to double down on its failing policy in Syria to save what it considers to be a pillar of the `resistance axis' in the Middle East. On the other hand, a failure to prop up Assad's regime may prompt Iran to work to create a rump `Alawi minority state along the Mediterranean Coast. Neither scenario is acceptable to GCC leaders who have decided that Syria will remain a central Arab state to whose reconstitution and reconstruction they are committed. To that end, they have participated in the international coalition to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, pledged financial and material backing to moderate forces on the battlefield, and funded the Syrian opposition's program and institutional development. Such a GCC stand is also necessitated by hedging against what in Iraq seems to be a slow expropriation of the country by pro-Iranian militia groups and politicians.



Destruction in a Damascus Suburb, April 2015

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Lebanon

Iran's proxy Hezbollah and its allies in the Lebanese political system are slowly strangling political life in Beirut. The country has lacked for a president since May, 2014, and the Party of God is spearheading a drive to arrest all constitutional legitimacy by paralyzing the government of Prime Minister Tammam Salam –which is constitutionally vested with the powers of the absent president – and refusing to allow the convening of parliamentary sessions. The party has also committed Lebanon's peace and stability to an uncertain outcome of Syria's civil war by sending its fighters to defend regime areas and wage war against the Syrian opposition.

Hezbollah's political opponents are convinced that the party, and Tehran behind it, are maneuvering to change Lebanon's long-established consociational system to allow for a dominant role for the country's Shi'a. They also reason that enfeebling the Lebanese state is another Iranian-Hezbollah tactic to force its capture as a hedge against their total loss of Syria in the future. With the nuclear deal in place, many believe that Iran will feel emboldened enough to finally and completely underwrite a Hezbollah takeover in Beirut.

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But such a scenario will be hard to achieve or sustain if successful. First, GCC, Arab, and international opinion and counter-measures will make this scenario too costly for Iran after the agreement. Second, domestic conditions and forces in Lebanon will oppose a Hezbollah putsch and force its retreat, especially while it is busy in Syria. Third, it is unlikely that Israel will accept an Iranian base on its northern border and will most likely act militarily to prevent its establishment. In sum, these factors will work to favor the GCC position regarding Lebanon and its historical relations with its people, economy, and institutions.

Iraq

It is in Iraq that Iran has found its most influential sectarian inroads, a condition that since the American invasion of 2003 has prompted concern and outright anxiety among GCC leaders. While not fully beholden to Iranian strategic planning and wishes, Iraqi leaders still show reticence and reluctance to assert their country's national interests vis-à-vis Iran's. The Islamic Republic's success in organizing, recruiting for, and funding Shiite sectarian militias has proven to be an essential tactic for asserting its quasi-dominance of Iraqi domestic politics and foreign policy orientation despite the role purportedly played by the United States to help Iraq's political reconciliation.



General Qassem Sulaimani with Kurdish fighters in Iraq

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The signing of the nuclear deal may give Iran the confidence to assert a steady dominance in Iraq and multiplier effects along the Gulf; namely in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. But, in turn, the added confidence felt by the countries of the GCC – currently successfully involved in fighting domestic extremism, ISIS, and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen – is likely to limit the long-term strategic benefits that the Islamic Republic may reap from a weakened Iraq. Additionally, the GCC can also count on the residual Arab nationalist feeling among Iraq's Shi'a whose *marja`iyya* (source of emulation) is not beholden to the current Iranian leadership, as well as on the strong identification among Iraq's Sunni communities with their GCC and Arab counterparts. Indeed, despite many doubts, Iraq may yet prove to be the weak link in an overstretched Iranian strategic and military landscape, with and without a nuclear deal with the P5+1.

Yemen

The GCC's steadfast response to the Houthi challenge to legitimate authority in Yemen since the summer of 2014 spelled the beginning of a general 'awakening' by the Gulf Arab States to defend core territory, interests, and strategic posture. While no Iranian direct help of the Houthi rebels has

been uncontestedly proven in the country over the last few months, the losses incurred by the insurgents and forces loyal to former President `Ali `Abdallah Saleh in Aden and its environs cannot augur well for any potential benefit by the Islamic Republic in the soft underbelly of the GCC. In other words, after resolute GCC action in Bahrain in 2011 arrested chaos, Yemen stands as living example of unified policy and action to abort any Iranian strategy to win a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula.



Saudi Arabian soldier in action on Yemen border

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This state of affairs is unlikely to change once the ink of the nuclear agreement dries despite Iranian political and military leaders' room to maneuver and re-calibrate plans and designs regarding Yemen. The Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition, the indigenous Yemeni forces fighting to restore legitimate rule to Sana'a, and the effective cordon around Yemen's land and maritime borders will continue to prevent potential Iranian assistance to the Houthis. Short of an outright challenge to Saudi Arabian forces over and around Yemen, the Islamic Republic will not be in a position to influence events in Yemen to any measurable degree.

Conclusion

It is true that the nuclear agreement and its ratification by the Security Council will give Iran added self-confidence and financial wherewithal and allow it if it so wished to increase its interference in affairs about which the GCC cares. But it is also true that at least two realities are likely to limit how far Iran will go or how effective it will be.

First, there is a renewed and firm commitment on the part of the GCC to patiently and resolutely challenge Iranian designs in all of the countries where it now boasts to play an important role. This will undoubtedly be a poignant consideration in Iranian strategic thinking in the coming period. Second, Iran in the future will find itself on the receiving end of inevitable social and economic forces created and nurtured by an influx of badly-needed funds and reform ideas that may contain the germ of political change so far arrested by the dominant religious-military complex created by the 1979 Revolution.

Images accessed August 3, 2015

Damascus suburb

http://cdn.theatlantic.com/assets/media/img/photo/2015/04/in-syria-four-years-of-war/s17_RTR4W6PT/main_1200.jpg?GE2DEOBTGUZTEOJYFYA=====

Sulaimani in Iraq

http://vid.alarabiya.net/images/2014/10/06/66060913-67de-4512-82c5-841ebb96512e/66060913-67de-4512-82c5-841ebb96512e_16x9_600x338.jpg

Saudi Arabian soldier on Yemeni border

<http://static3.businessinsider.com/image/556c7ee469bedde96dcba7ae-480/saudi-arabia-explosion-yemen-rocket-mortar.jpg>