



US-Iran: The Nuclear Talks

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The Middle East (West Asia) region is an area of great civilisations, simmering tensions and enormous reserves of oil and natural gas. Today, most of the region is facing instability and chaos. The Palestine issue remains unresolved, Iraq is dealing with insurgency, Syria is embroiled in a civil war, and Lebanon is tense. To add to this is the adverse reactions of the international community to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Iran is one of the most important nations and plays a significant role in the politics and economy of the Middle East. There has been a rise in Iran's influence in the region especially in the post 9/11 years. The international community's war against Al Qaeda terrorism after 9/11 has led to regional crises in Afghanistan and Iraq. These crises have brought about new geopolitical developments putting the Middle East and its issues at the heart of international security concerns in two ways: first, by changing the role of regional and international actors; and second, by changing the nature of security threats.¹ It is feared by the US and some Arab states like Saudi Arabia that Iran is slowly but steadily expanding its influence in the region, taking advantage of the turmoil. The war in Iraq and the subsequent insurgency is part of the political security affairs of its neighbour. The increasing importance of the Shiite and Kurdish factors in Iraq after the US military intervention has increased Iran's influence in the country. Iran is also helping Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in his efforts to defeat the opposition forces in a civil war. This has led to fears within the Arab nations of losing their authority to Iran. This has also prompted the US to take a

much closer look into its Middle East policy as it has built strong alliances with most of the states that oppose the rise of Iran into prominence. The nuclear programme is seen as an extension of Iran's attempt to expand its importance and prominence in the region.

Iran's Nuclear Programme

Iran's quest for nuclear technology started as far back as the 1950s. It received assistance as part of the US 'Atoms for Peace' programme. The programme aimed to promote the use of nuclear technology for non-military use. Under the programme the US provided assistance in the form of nuclear technology and material. Propelled by this assistance, Iran's nuclear programme made steady progress. By the 1970s other European nations like France and Germany joined the US in assisting Iran's nuclear programme. Iran became a part of the non-proliferation regime when it signed and ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As a Non-Nuclear weapons State Party in the treaty, Iran agreed, "... not to acquire or produce nuclear weapons or nuclear explosive devices. It was required also to accept safeguards to detect diversions of nuclear materials from peaceful activities, such as power generation, to the production of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices."²

The US became concerned over intelligence reports that the Shah of Iran could have started to pursue a nuclear weapons programme as well. This concern led western governments to withdraw support for Iran's nuclear program. Pressure on France, which in 1973 signed a deal to build two reactors at Darkhovin, and Germany, whose Kraftwerk Union began building a pair of reactors at Bushehr in 1975, led to the cancellation of both projects.³ The Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis from November 1979 to January 1981 led to the termination of diplomatic relations between the US and Iran. The US increased pressure on all countries conducting nuclear cooperation and research with Iran to discontinue their assistance.

The withdrawal of support for nuclear technology reduced the pace of nuclear progress. The Iran-Iraq war, opposition to nuclear technology by Ayatollah Khomeini, the persecution of nuclear scientists and their subsequent exodus had a detrimental effect on the nuclear programme within Iran. This was further accelerated by Israel's attack on its nuclear facility in 1981.

A revival was seen under Ayatollah Khamenei who set out to rebuild Tehran's programme. With sanctions against the country, it had to depend on its own limited expertise to restart the initiative, though it has now been revealed that Iran received assistance from Pakistan's proliferation network, headed by Dr. A.Q. Khan.⁴ The discovery of Iraq's clandestine programmes, the first Gulf War and the increasing US presence in the region were perhaps some of the reasons for Iran to further expedite its nuclear research.

Iran's nuclear programme received a boost when Russia announced in 1995 that it would provide assistance to complete the two 950 megawatt light-water reactors in Bushehr and also build three additional reactors.⁵ Russia has stated that it supports Iran's endeavour to seek nuclear energy for civil use. This assistance was strongly protested by the US which claimed that Iran was developing nuclear weapons technology.⁶

The US has long suspected that Iran was clandestinely developing nuclear weapons in the guise of civil nuclear programmes. In 2002, Iran made public its yet undeclared uranium enrichment plant in Natanz and a heavy water reactor in Arak.⁷ The revelations came after opposition groups in the UK made public Iran's clandestine activities. This was taken by the US and the international community as proof of Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. Enriched uranium can be used to make nuclear weapons, and spent fuel from a heavy-water reactor contains plutonium suitable for a bomb.

Iran in its defence stated that the facilities are part of its civil programme and aimed at electrification and medical use. The Iranian government agreed to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect the sites. However, the IAEA was unable to confirm Iran's assertions and could not conclusively state that nuclear material and technology was not being diverted for military use.⁸ This caused a breakdown in relations between Iran and the international community.

The international community led by the US called upon Iran to stop enriching uranium failing which they would impose sanctions. Iran under President Ahmadinejad halted the talks rejecting curbs on Iran's nuclear programme. Following three years of investigations the IAEA referred the matter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and sited Iran for failing to

comply with the provisions of the NPT. Since 2005, the UNSC has imposed six resolutions calling on Iran to halt its uranium enrichment activities and imposed sanctions.⁹ These sanctions have slowly crippled the Iranian economy.

The Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal

Iran started negotiating in 2003 with the European Union (France, Germany and the United Kingdom or EU-3) in a bid to allay the negative reports about its nuclear programme and show seriousness to the UNSC. Iran agreed to more IAEA inspections to prove that it was not building a nuclear weapon. In 2005, the US, Russia and China joined the negotiations and it came to be known as P-5+1 and Iran talks.

The negotiations have been a game of ‘one step forward, two steps back’, with both sides trying to blame the other for stalling. The US imposed strict sanctions on Iran. It was also successful in gathering the support of the international community to apply similar sanctions. Taken all together they have had an adverse impact on the economy of Iran. It has caused enormous hardship to the citizens of the country. The international community, especially the US have been criticised by Iran for being biased towards it; but the sanctions have not been lifted. In November 2013, a temporary deal was signed by the two sides. Under this interim agreement, called “The Joint Plan of Action” or more popularly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, Iran has agreed to suspend Uranium fuel enrichment. It reaffirms that under no circumstances will it ever seek or develop any nuclear weapons. This interim agreement is valid for a period of six months. The time period has been incorporated to allow both sides to implement the provisions of the agreement while negotiating a permanent agreement.

Under the current deal, Iran will not enrich uranium over five percent for the duration of six months. It also announced that it will not undertake any further development activities at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant, Fordow, or the Arak reactor. Iran will continue to develop its Research and Development (R&D) facilities, including its current enrichment R&D, but there would be no new locations for enrichment. Iran has agreed to the enhanced monitoring of its nuclear related activities by the IAEA. The deal also includes provisions specific to the information that Iran has to provide to the IAEA within three months of this agreement coming into force.¹⁰

In return, the US and other countries would voluntarily take action to remove sanctions on Iran's crude oil sales, enabling Iran's current customers to purchase crude oil, and allow the repatriation of an agreed amount of revenue held abroad. For such oil sales, it has agreed to suspend the EU and US sanctions on associated insurance and transportation services. It has been agreed that sanctions on Iran's petrochemical exports, as well as sanctions on associated services will be removed. Iran has been assured that no new sanctions would be applied on the country.¹¹

In the event of the successful implementation of the permanent agreement, Iran has been assured that its nuclear programme would be treated in the same manner as the nuclear programme of any other non-nuclear weapons state.¹²

The US Need for the Deal

The political scene in the Middle East is increasingly becoming complex; disagreements have started to come to the surface redrawing the map of alliances and conflicts among regional players and global powers. The warmth and enthusiasm was lacking during the recent visit by US Secretary of State John Kerry, to the Middle East due to the US stand on some issues, especially Iran. This posits a question whether these growing disappointments, which sometimes are accompanied by independent actions, indicate that the US is losing its influence in the Middle East.¹³

It is an off repeated statement that the Middle East is an important region for the US. It has interest in the stability of the region for secure supply of energy resources and in support of its allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. To these traditional reasons new ones have been added such as the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism, and nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Cold War rivalry has also been revived with Russia increasing its role in the region. Russia has been instrumental in facilitating Syria to surrender its chemical weapons. This action is in support of the UN led investigation of Syrian chemical weapons. It has established a naval task force in the Mediterranean Sea to facilitate its support to the Syrian government. Today any peace talk with Syria is inconceivable without Russia. Beyond Syria, Russia has been supportive of the military in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood and is sympathetic of the Iranian government in its quest to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. It has ensured its presence on most of the important decisions on peace and stability in the Middle East.

The US reaction to the Syrian conflict, the Iranian nuclear programme and the recent developments in Egypt has disappointed the Saudi government. The two allies, who have cooperated on many regional issues in the past have different solutions to the above stated crises. The other important US ally, Israel too has expressed strong opposition to the negotiations with the Iranian regime. Israel has been vocal about its displeasure to lift sanctions against the Iranian regime, which it claims is the reason that Iran was forced to come to the negotiating table. A few members of the US Congress have also expressed their reservations on the deal. Speaking to the press, House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) stated, “The interim deal has been and will continue to be met with healthy scepticism and hard questions... Iran has a history of obfuscation that demands verification of its activities and places the burden on the regime to prove it is upholding its obligations in good faith while a final deal is pursued.”¹⁴

US President Barak Obama has supported the deal and assured the Congress that if Iran doesn't comply with the provisions then any sanctions that have been withdrawn would be re-imposed along with tougher ones. Even now, the most crippling of the sanctions continue to be in place and would remain for the time being. However, he has called upon the Congress as well as the international community to implement the deal and give Iran an opportunity. If successful it would ensure a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Recent meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif is another sign of the serious efforts being made by the two countries to ensure the success of this deal.¹⁵ The deal is equally important to end the international isolation of Iran and allow it to play an important role in regional politics. It will also push it on a path of economic recovery.

Conclusion

For the US, this deal is important for a number of reasons. It allows the US to rebuild its relations with Iran which were terminated after the Iranian revolution. It is also an opportunity for the US and Iran to overcome their past differences and suspicions of the other. The US has realised that Iran is an important regional actor with considerable influence in both Syria and Iraq. With the US withdrawing from Afghanistan by the end of this year, there are widespread speculations from within the US intelligence agencies that the Taliban forces would gain some alliance territories. Iran could be called upon to help in rebuilding of the nation. Iraq is another state where the promised

peace is eluding the US with wide spread sectarian violence. In such a situation, the US is wary of committing itself to the civil war in Syria. It is highly improbable that the US citizens would allow the Congress or the White House to commit US troops to another war.

In such a situation, Iran with its influence could help the US stabilise Iraq. The Iranian government is also a key ally of President Bashar Al-Assad. While the US asked the UN to drop its invitation to Iran to join in the peace talks, the White House is aware that the key to the resolution of the Syrian civil war is with the support from Tehran.

The US would like to ensure that Iran's influence in the region be used to achieve a broader objective of non-proliferation by ensuring that its nuclear programme is safeguarded under the protocols of the IAEA. It would also help the US in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and strengthening the prohibitions against their development.

Iran also provides the US with an alternate power in the region apart from Saudi Arabia. While it would be presumptuous to say that US is building relations to counter Saudi Arabia, its long standing ally, it can be said with some certainty that the US is exploring ways to expand its reach apart from the Saudi influence.

As the US develops and explores other sources of energy to decrease its reliance on energy needs from the Middle East, it is speculated that the US could rethink its interests in the region. This might be true but it has to be kept in mind that the US allies would be still dependent on oil from the region. It also has considerable geopolitical and strategic interests in the region ranging from the security of Israel, counter terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and maintaining friendly relations with its long standing allies.

The US action in some instances and inaction in others is seen as proof of a subtle shift in its Middle East Policy. For the US, despite these shifts, the Middle East will continue to be an area of interest and it will not let its influence diminish in this important geostrategic region.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

Endnotes:

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