

REGIONAL CONCERNS ON IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND APPROACH TOWARDS RECENT INTERIM AGREEMENT BETWEEN IRAN AND P5+1

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Abstract:

It was unexpected when on the morning of November 24, 2013 Iranian chief negotiator Jawad Zarief tweeted that we have reached an agreement. Soon after his tweet the news spread out to the world observers, analysts and international community welcomed the deal but interestingly the countries from Middle East showed some mix reaction on this agreement which could become an important factor for the future deal between Iran and P5+1. This article is based on an analytical study to understand the causes behind the regional concerns on Iran's nuclear policy and also to identify the effects of recent agreement between world powers and Tehran on the politics of the region. It also tries to examine and evaluate the futuristic approach of important regional players on the issue of nuclear Iran.

Keywords: *Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, Ba'athist ideology, Gulf Cooperation Council, Peninsula Shield Force, SAVAK, Hamas, Hezbollah, P5+1*

Introduction

In today's world nuclear technology has been seen as the symbol of innovation and excellence. That's why more than 430 nuclear power plants are functioning in thirty one states around the globe. Iran initiated its nuclear program under the aspiration of U.S "Atom for peace" program and in 1967 U.S provided a 5 MW research reactor to Tehran. Throughout Shah's era Iran continued to develop its nuclear facilities and it was one of those states who signed the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on its very opening day. During the Shah's era Israel and the

Regional Arab monarchs had raised no resentment on Iran's well-known nuclear program. As member of the NPT, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) acknowledged Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear program and in that particular time they had no excuse to doubt its nonviolent exercise. Besides Israel, the regional realms changed their posture regarding Iran's nuclear program in the beginning of 21st century, when Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK) claimed that Iran is working on a clandestine nuclear program. Iran's growing nuclear facilities and lack of transparency in its nuclear strategy produced unfathomable fear among the neighboring countries. Even though Iran has barely finished its first nuclear power plant in 2010 but still Israel and these Arab peninsula states are unconformable with the dimension of Iranian nuclear program.

The Roots of Tensions between Iran and Gulf States

However, interrupting this history are phases of strain between the GCC Countries and Iran.

Till now, Iranian authorities are not willing to negotiate with UAE to solve the issue regarding these islands, which further strict the relations between Iran and its neighboring states. Subsequent to the revolt Khomeini further expanded Shia ruling premises and tried to extend the rebellion to other regional states by tagging all the governments in the region as un-Islamic. Under the Ayatollah's Ideology, Tehran played a major part in political uprising in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and a coup plot in Bahrain. The Iranian administration still keen to inflict Iranian supremacy in the Middle East and refuses to give in control of the occupied islands to the UAE.

Tehran's destabilizing influence force the neighboring Sunni monarchs to draw nearer to Iraqi dictator in order to join forces against a common threat knowing that Iran is imagining itself as a superpower in the region. Furthermore, the Arabian realms were bothered when the Iraq-Iran conflict broke out. Because of this conflict Arab States formed the alliance in the shape of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to create a combined security organization. Soon after forming alliance the GCC proclaimed that it would a take impartial stance on this regional conflict. The GCC states blamed Iran as the major reason behind the revolt in the Arabian Gulf States. In other incidents, disturbances during the annual Hajj

pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia by shia minority was also considered as Tehran backed conspiracy to weaken the kingdom. The suspicions within the GCC further aggravated when Kuwait was attacked in December 1983.

From the 80s to the present, Bahrain and Kuwait having a significant Shiite population frequently show apprehensions that Tehran is motivating turmoil among Shiites, emphasizing reservations about their domestic stability. Recently, Egypt, Yemen and Morocco have spelt similar anxiety. Tehran also utilizes non state actors (Hezbollah & Others) which played their part as a threat to those international and regional players which have hostile relations with Iran. Others view Iran's regional aspirations in a broader sense. In addition, the relationship between the United States and the GCC countries is also a reason of tension between Iran and its neighboring countries. Certainly, there is a power struggle in the region among Iranian aliens (Syria, Hezbollah & Hamas) and Arab states which are ruled by Sunni monarchs. At the beginning of this decade relations between Bahrain and Iran became more uptight as a result of rebellion by Shiites in Bahrain which was allegedly backed by Iran and successfully overwhelmed after the deployment of Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) troops. Consequently, it is widely believed that if Tehran succeeds to attain nuclear arsenals then the balance of power will be shifted towards Iran which is not good for regional stability and clearly un-acceptable for the regional states.

Nuclear Weapons Program and Shiite Factor

Iran's allegedly violent nuclear agenda is a big concern for the region, particularly for the Sunni monarchs who believe that Tehran's primary policy is to promote the Shiite dominance in the region. In 2010, Wiki Leaks claimed that Jordan and Saudi Arabia had asked United States to halt the Iran's nuclear program, by force if necessary.

The question arises or to why do GCC states fear Iran's nuclear program more than Israel's was in the 1960s? As the vital nexus of oil production and transshipment, the region is a financial hub for the international economy. All of the Gulf States reliance on the security of the oil markets for their revenues; hence stability of the region is necessary for these states.

First, it is widely believed that in case of unsuccessful negotiations between Iran and P5+1, Washington or Tel Aviv could take preventive military action against

Iran's nuclear facilities. Particularly, Israel has a past of such measures, when it shattered nuclear amenities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 with targeted airstrikes. Moreover the Israeli air force had carried out drills which appear as a replicate a situation in which they would attack the Iranian enrichment sites. In the case of armed conflict between Iran and Israel or the U.S, the rest of the region especially Arab states have no wish to become wedged in the crossfire, militarily or politically.

Secondly, these states commonly fear that with nuclear weapons Iran would adopt more hostile policies for the political superiority in the region. Therefore GCC fears that, if Tehran succeeds to gain a nuclear weapon then it would dominate the region and stand up to the pressure of the U.S and the other powers; after neutralizing the western pressure it would intervene more in the affairs of neighboring countries and the region's economic interests. This could have a destabilizing effect on the political stability of moderate regimes in the Middle East.

Thirdly, Arab monarchs believe that nuclear armed Iran would embark the nuclear arm race in the region and it further intensifies the brittle Sunni-Shiite variance in the region. The scenario could promote the Shiite residents in Sunni dominated states to adopt the antagonistic means for government change, which destabilize the domestic situations in an already fragile region. Some of the reports published in western media suggest that Saudis have been taken on board by the Israelis in case they decide to strike Iranian nuclear installations and therefore, Saudis have already given a green signal to Israel for using its airspace to strike Iran (Tomlinson, 2010). There is an implicit unity of views between the regional and western powers that Tehran must be prohibited from gaining nuclear weapons, and in case of diplomatic failure other alternatives like economic sanctions or a military action should be utilize to stop Iran from attaining nuclear arms capability.

Because of the above mentioned causes, Iran's nuclear program is professed as a grave menace to the stability and balance of power for the entire region. Therefore, regional states utilize all political and diplomatic platforms to highlight the issue of Iranian nuclear program. Furthermore, some of these states also declared to expand their nuclear programs on the similar levels to Iran as a way to balance the regional dynamics.

Israel's Perception on Iran's Nuclear Program

Israel had good relations with Iran throughout the Reza Shah Pahlavi's era. Israel provided the Shah with weapons and trained his secret police, the infamous SAVAK, and Iran provided Israel with oil, even during the Arab oil embargo after the October 1973 War (Parsi, 2007). After the fall of Reza Shah's monarchy, Israel changed its policies for Iran and new regime became a hazard for Tel Aviv because of its ideological and military support for creation of Hezbollah, which later become an eminent threat for the U.S and Israel in Middle East region. The relation between both states became more hostile when Iranian authorities started to openly support Palestinian Jihadist groups (Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad).

Israeli authorities' claims that Iran with nuclear weapons could become more vulnerable for Tel Aviv, it might provide a nuclear umbrella to its supported proxy groups, and probably provide them nuclear arsenals.

Israeli defense analysts showed diverse concerns on Tehran's acquirement of nuclear arsenals.

The most basic fear, that an Iranian weapon would grant cover for Tehran and its regional associates to act more violently to Tel Aviv, is frequently articulated through the instance of Hezbollah. At present, Israeli authorities claim that Hezbollah confines its measures against Israeli territory because of terror of Israeli reprisal in Beirut.

Secondly Israeli authorities extensively believe that a nuclear weapon in the hands of Iranian cleric would only strengthen the apparent ongoing decline in Washington's regional influence. Israel considers that Tehran's quest for nuclear capabilities is the most fundamental global issue of the century, and its outcome will affect the rank of United States in international community.

Israeli authorities also believe that the without any doubt a nuclear Iran would originate further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Almost every Israeli strategic assessment on the issue consists of this prospect, especially its stance for Iran to halting research on nuclear technology trends such suppositions.

Saudi and Israeli Efforts to Sabotage the Talks

Throughout the recent negotiations between Iran and P5+1 both (Tel Aviv & Riyadh) played their part to sabotage the talks and convince those leading world

powers to take a hard stance and adopt further sanctions against the Tehran. During second round of negotiations (7 to 10 November 2013) between Iran and world powers it was clearly expected that both parties has an understanding and they finally going to achieve an agreement but on very last moment France raised some unexpected concerns and backed away from the talks other members of the P5+1 were also shocked and many observers blamed France for non-compliance. Many writers claimed that in reality France sabotage the talks to save its interests in Middle East. The first reason given was that Paris has signed a multibillion-dollar arms contract with Riyadh in recent months and it's also involved in strategic economic cooperation with various GCC states. Key fields of interest comprise power, water and electrical infrastructure, construction and arms deals.

Throughout the talks Israeli authorities tried hard to convince Western powers specifically U.S to adopt zero tolerance policy and made it clear that if Tehran agrees to halt its nuclear program completely then the deal could be acceptable for Tel Aviv and to achieve this goal they adopt all methods of persuasion. The delegations were sanded to Washington and European states for lobbying against expected nuclear deal and a vast media campaign against the expected deal was launched. Although these Israeli efforts were failed to prevent the agreement but still playing important part in U.S congress because the vast majority of U.S congressmen still wants to pass further sanctions against Tehran.

The Interim Agreement and Reaction from GCC and Israel

On November 24th 2013 Iran and P5+1 signed an interim agreement. This significant breakthrough was achieved after very long and intense negotiations. All foreign ministers from P5+1 and Iran as well as European Chief Negotiator Baroness Catherine Ashton welcomed the agreement. The accord is seen as a significant first step towards an inclusive solution to end the controversy over Iran's nuclear energy program. According to Joint Plan of Action Iran and the E3+3 aimed to wrap up the final agreement in no more than one year. According to this six months interim deal Tehran will halt ongoing development on its nuclear program and rollback major elements in return for momentary and partial relief on sanctions from the E3+3. Here are the key points of what the two sides agreed:

For P5+1 this agreement is seen as a big win after ten years of negotiation they finally succeeded to convince Tehran to neutralize its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, also to stop its construction work at Arak and stop installing centrifuges to its nuclear amenities.

On the other hand Tehran is happy for the recognition of its right to enrich uranium. Under the clause of this agreement Tehran has a right to enrich uranium up to 5% for its nuclear plants. This amount of enrichment is sufficient to generate electrical energy, but not sufficient for the development of nuclear weapon.

As mentioned above, the agreement was welcomed by international community but the states from the Middle East region showed mixed reactions.

Israeli Stance on Agreement

Israel's reaction to the interim agreement has been constantly unwelcoming from the beginning;

The Israeli Prime Minister took this agreement very seriously and from the initiation of these negotiations he was campaigning to halt Iran's all enrichment capabilities. Many political thinkers believe that this agreement will end the efforts for the Nuclear Free Zone in the Middle East as it will pull Tel Aviv further away from the negotiation table. Another Israeli minister Naftali Bennett showed more intense response than prime minister and said.

Response from the GCC States

The GCC states had showed mix reaction on Interim agreement. The early statements from Manama, Doha, Kuwait City and the Abu Dhabi have emerge in favor of this agreement, though all those kingdoms still have severe doubts in private. Only Oman appears satisfied because it played hidden role as an icebreaker among the Washington and Tehran. The initial statement from Saudi Arabian came through from its cabinet which stated that,

But as the regional Arab heavyweight and historic rivalry with Iran for power and influence Saudi Arabia sees anything that lets the pressure off Iran as a setback. The chairman of Saudi Arabia's appointed Shoura Council Abdullah al-Askar's statement is clear example of it. As he said:

On the whole, Saudi Arabia's position on the agreement seems to carry more confusion and anger than that of other GCC states. Media outlets quoting official sources said that Riyadh was "not satisfied" with the agreement, and did not understand why the US rushed toward Iran, despite the negative nature of Iran's policies in the region and toward regional states. The Saudi ambassador to London said that his country "will not stand idly by in the face of the danger posed by the Iranian nuclear program if the US, the UK and the other major powers fail to stop this program."

Saudi Arabia's anger was not eased by U.S Secretary of State John Kerry's rush to visit Saudi Arabia to reassure the kingdom, nor by US President Barack Obama's phone call to the Saudi king to brief him on the details of the agreement. A potential rapprochement between Iran and the US has already strained US-Saudi relations, and Iran remains a difficult issue for bilateral relations. Many read the Saudi rejection of a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council as also being in protest of the Western, US-led approach towards Iran.

Conclusion

The study shows that the Gulf States are afraid of Iranian nuclear program because of its policies behind the promotion of sectarianism and policies to regain regional hegemony. On the other hand Tel Aviv is against it because of its support for Hezbollah and Hamas. The international reaction on this provisional accord among Iran and P5+1 is constructive but it is also a reality that the most of the regional states are displeased and unhappy on the agreement. Even though the initial responses from Arabian Peninsula states were quite positive but in general, private statements by the Arab officials were pretty cruel and made overwhelming outcome on Washington's intentions to resolve the issue with Tehran. The small states from the region have lot of concerns about the underlying trends with regards to the Iranian re-entry into the Arab world and the US positioning on this. It is, of course, a nuclear issue, but it is also broader for the Arab Gulf states. Therefore, as soon as accord signed these states instantaneously make contact with their defense partners (United States and other European giants) to re-examine their defense ties. But the regional heavyweights (Israel and Saudi Arabia) took a clear stance against this deal and conveyed a strict message to the Washington that its policies towards Tehran should be prepared on their provided guidelines or else they will look forward for new economic and security ties with

those nations which value their national interests. The Saudi officials had labeled American President's approach towards Iran as imperfect and asserted that sanctions relief will be an enormous blunder that will provide Tehran more dominance in the region. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia believes that this agreement provide more power to Tehran, which intimidate its regional supremacy. In reality the deal among the world powers and Iran was quite unexpected for the Saudi and Israeli administrations therefore both of these states showed disappointment and outrageousness on U.S role in these negotiations.

The influential Israeli lobbies in United States continuously claiming that even peaceful nuclear program under the current Iranian administration is not in the favor of region. They believe a peaceful program is inherently a pathway to militant program, that there is no way to create a barrier between the two—and that if Iran wanted, it could maintain a robust civilian program for years and then, at some point, break free and become a nuclear military power (Zakaria, 2013). Thus, the Israel backed lobbies are mobilized and keenly doing their work in United States and other European states to halt this or any further agreement between Iran and P5+1. So far, the Iranian deal has only fed more fears, rather than providing comfort to regional powers, and this is something that the United States has to take very seriously. The other world powers have a lot to do to bring about a new balance, a better balance, as part of any transformation of the region. On the other hand Tehran can attain an inadequate benefit from this agreement but to become a part of international economy it seriously needs to take confidence building measures with the regional and international powers in particular with the United States. In future Tehran has to stop interfering in other state's domestic problems and good relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel is the only way which can bring the regional stability and continuity of its nuclear program.

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