



THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN

By **Brandon Friedman**



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In a provocative sliver of a book, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East*, which was published before the "Arab Spring" upheavals, French scholar Olivier Røy argues that three "traumas" mark the contemporary history of the Arab Middle East between Suez and Iran.¹ The first trauma was the European-designed post-World War I state system that ended Sharif Husayn's vision of one independent Arab-Muslim kingdom from Arabia to the western border of Iran. The second trauma was the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and the repeated defeats suffered at its hands.

The third trauma, Røy argues, is still unfolding and is the destruction of Sunni Arab political supremacy east of Suez. Røy argues that this trauma took place in two stages: the first stage was the 1978-1979 Iranian Revolution, which resulted in the establishment of the revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran. The second stage were the chain of events set in motion by 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which led to Shi'i domination of the Iraqi state. The Iranian nuclear negotiation should be viewed in the context of this third trauma. The world justifiably sees the Iranian nuclear negotiations in the global context of upholding nuclear non-proliferation and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, which surely it is. But in the Middle East, the nuclear negotiations are viewed as being inextricably linked to the broader struggle for the legitimate stewardship of the region, as well as to the regional balance of power.

Nuclear Negotiations and Regional Issues

The International Crisis Group, in an important May 2014 report, "Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube," argued that isolating the nuclear negotiation with Iran from the broader regional context (the civil war in Syria, as well as Iran's involvement in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen) was a necessary precondition for the negotiation's success and perhaps even for Iran's participation, asserting "Success is possible only with political will to isolate the deal – at least for now – from its complex regional context."² In reality, the nuclear negotiation was never isolated or delinked from the participants' perceptions of the regional balance of power. Yet by agreeing to place regional issues outside the scope of the nuclear negotiations in 2013, the EU3+3 created a situation where any potential outcome to the negotiation would be viewed by Iran's rivals as tilting the regional balance of power in Iran's favor. Therefore, this newly announced nuclear deal with Iran is likely to intensify the regional security competition rather than temper it.

In Iran, as Henry Kissinger points out, "the nuclear issue was treated as one aspect of a general struggle over regional order and ideological supremacy, fought in a range of arenas and territories with methods spanning the spectrum of war and peace – military and paramilitary operations, diplomacy, formal negotiation propaganda and political subversion – in fluid and reinforcing combination."³ In a 2014 interview with David Remnick of the *New Yorker*, President Obama outlined a U.S. vision for regional order based on creating an equilibrium between the Sunni states of the region and Iran: "And although it

¹ Olivier Røy, *The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), translated from the French by Ros Schwartz.

² International Crisis Group, "Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube," Middle East Report No. 152, May 9, 2014, p. i.

³ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press), p. 163.

would not solve the entire problem, if we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion – not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon – you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare.”⁴ In other words, the U.S. President envisioned a short-term process of socializing Iran that would have a transformative effect on the regional order.

In the coming days and weeks, the public will be evaluating the details of the newly announced nuclear deal with Iran. The arguments will address the number of Iranian centrifuges (the issue driving the formula for evaluating Iran's potential “breakout” time), the amount of Low-Enriched Uranium (LEU) it will retain and in what form, the inspections mechanism, the expiration date of the agreement, and the structure of sanctions relief. The purpose of these debates will be to evaluate the strengths (and weaknesses) of the deal. This discussion, important to be sure, will overshadow many broader aspects of the nuclear negotiation with Iran – missing the forest for the trees.

The nuclear negotiation between the EU3+3⁵ and Iran is inextricably linked to the conflicts engulfing the Middle East today. Yet when negotiations were renewed in 2013 following Hassan Rouhani's June election in Iran, the November 2013 [Joint Plan of Action \(JPOA\)](#) did not include a plan for addressing Iran's role in the conflicts across the region.⁶

The EU3+3 walled off regional issues from the nuclear negotiations with Iran, choosing to accommodate the claim from Iran's negotiators that they had no mandate to address Iran's regional activity within the framework of the nuclear negotiations.⁷ This was a large concession the EU3+3 made to Iran without receiving anything commensurate in return.

This unreciprocated concession would seem to support the thrust of Michael Doran's argument in his February 2015 essay, “Obama's Secret Iran Strategy.”⁸ Doran argues that the U.S. is pursuing a “secret” long-term strategy that aims to integrate Iran into the international diplomatic and economic system as a means to moderating its political system and regional behavior. Prior to Doran's report, in January 2015, the Center for New American Security (CNAS) published a report titled, “Slow Thaw: Testing Possibilities for Cooperation with Iran After a Nuclear Deal,” in which the authors explain what they perceive as the effect of a nuclear deal on Iran's foreign policy:

On the one hand, if a final nuclear deal results in Iran's diplomatic reintegration into the international community and a significant improvement in the country's economy, this could provide President Hassan Rouhani and his pragmatic backers with substantial political momentum. Khamenei might, as a result, give Rouhani greater influence in areas of Iranian foreign policy beyond the nuclear program...A win on the “nuclear file” might enable Rouhani and Zarif to convince Khamenei to give them greater autonomy and to begin to claw back additional aspects of Iranian foreign policy from the Revolutionary Guards.”⁹

It is hard to say, definitively, whether the Obama administration intentionally excluded regional interests from the nuclear negotiations with the ultimate aim of using a nuclear deal as a springboard into broader regional coordination with Iran, as outlined in detail in the CNAS report, and explained by Michael Doran. Whatever the case may be, Iran has been able to use its influence and activity in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen as implicit bargaining leverage during the nuclear negotiation. In other words, by excluding its regional behavior from the nuclear negotiation, Iran has been able to use its regional influence as both a carrot and stick during the nuclear negotiation.

Iran dangles the prospect of altering its regional behavior as a carrot to the EU3+3. Iran can tacitly link a satisfactory resolution to the nuclear crisis to the prospect of a more cooperative and less confrontational regional posture. However, because regional issues are not part of the negotiation, Iran will be under no obligation to change its behavior. In the aftermath of the announced deal, the economic constraints on Iran's ability to project power in the region will be removed. Conversely, had there been no nuclear deal Iran would have been in a position to stoke regional conflict, using its influence in Arab affairs as a stick, while at the same time more aggressively move its nuclear program forward.

⁴ David Remnick, “Going the Distance,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014.

⁵ Also known as the P5+1, includes France, Germany, the United Kingdom, as well as China, Russia, and the United States.

⁶ International Crisis Group, “[Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube](#),” Middle East Report No. 152, May 9, 2014, p. 3.

⁷ See: Laura Rozen, “Iran FM Zarif, meeting Kerry, says not authorized to discuss Syria,” [Al Monitor](#), February 2, 2014.

⁸ Michael Doran, “[Obama's Secret Iran Strategy](#),” *Mosaic Magazine*, February 2, 2015.

⁹ Ilan Goldenberg, Jacob Stokes, Nicholas A. Heras, “[Slow Thaw: Testing Possibilities for Cooperation with Iran After a Nuclear Deal](#),” CNAS Policy Brief, January 2015, pp. 3-4.

For Iran's Rahbar (Supreme Leader), 'Ali Khamenei, the Iranian carrot is an illusion. Iran has no intention of discussing regional issues with the U.S. He would like to exchange limited nuclear concessions for sanctions relief. In his March 21, 2015, [NoRuz speech](#), he put it in stark terms:

The second point about ongoing negotiations with European governments and America on the nuclear issue is that we only negotiate with America on the nuclear issue, not on any other issue. Everyone should know this. We do not negotiate with America on regional issues. America's goals in the region are the exact opposite of our goals. We want security and peace in the region. We want the rule of peoples over their countries. America's policy in the region is to create insecurity. Take a look at Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Arrogant governments – headed by America – have begun a counterattack against Islamic Awakening, which was created by nations. This counterattack is continuing in the present time and it is gradually creating a disastrous situation for nations. This is their goal, which is the exact opposite of ours. We do not at all negotiate with America, neither on regional issues, nor on domestic issues, or [sic] nor on the issue of weapons. Our negotiations with the Americans are confined to the nuclear issue and on how we can reach an agreement through diplomacy.

Khamenei would like to see Iran make a deal with EU3+3 that protects Iran's nuclear freedom of action but relieves some of the painful consequences that sanctions have inflicted on the Iranian economy. Iran's regional rivals interpret Khamenei's message as an expression of Iran's aim to oppose all American influence in the region, even in the aftermath of a nuclear deal, and fulfill its ambition of becoming the hegemonic regional power, which Iran believes is its natural role in the region.

In a wide-ranging interview in February, Iran's Foreign Minister and lead nuclear negotiator, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said, "some of our regional friends believe that with the resolution of the nuclear issue Iran's role in the region will increase. However, it must be noted that Iran's position as a powerful and influential regional country is a fact, and the Islamic Republic of Iran's influence is fully evident in spite of the media publicity that has been created by the Zionist regime and several other regional countries." Zarif further claimed that Iran's policies in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq were beyond question. Rouhani and Zarif share Khamenei's vision for Iran as the dominant regional power, they simply market that vision much better than Khamenei. Zarif claimed that the nuclear issue had created a number of obstacles for Iran in realizing "its true role in the region," but that when the nuclear issue was resolved those obstacles would be removed. Zarif argues that Iran is an extremely powerful and influential country, but it uses its power not to inflict blows on other countries' interests but to advance peace, cooperation, and friendship. Zarif reiterated that "it will be beneficial to all regional countries and our neighbors in the Persian Gulf if Iran were to play a role in the region and it will not be detrimental to anyone's interests."¹⁰

The Big Bet

Iran's desire to remove obstacles on its path to regional leadership in the Middle East does not converge with Barack Obama's vision for a U.S.-orchestrated equilibrium between Sunni Arab states (plus Israel) and Iran. For the Sunni Arab states, even if the U.S. succeeds in constraining Iran's nuclear program for 10-15 years, and succeeds in acting as the balancer to Iran's regional power (as mentioned in the Remnick interview cited earlier), when a prospective nuclear deal expires Iran will be free to obtain nuclear weapons if it chooses, limiting the U.S. ability to manage a regional equilibrium. At that point, Iran will be an unconstrained regional nuclear power.

The Obama administration appears to be betting that by that time Iran will have been socialized and transformed from a threatening and revolutionary spoiler into a moderate and constructive international partner. In other words, the U.S. may be gambling that Iran's social and political transformation outpaces Iran's nuclear development. In this scenario, Iran's regional behavior would be expected to change because it would calculate that the benefits it receives as a full international stakeholder outweigh the costs of pursuing a revolutionary (revisionist) foreign policy.

The Obama bet may be underestimating the strength of Iran's revolutionary national identity, which has been forged over the course of the past 36 years. Suggesting that Iran's foreign policy behavior can be socialized and transformed presumes that its behavior is based exclusively on a calculation of incentives rather than a mix of incentives and identity. Khamenei rejects the formula that calls not for a change to the Islamic Republic but for a change in its behavior. He views this posture as promoting "soft-revolution" within Iran, and as a backdoor attack on Iran's Islamic system. In a [March 12, 2015 speech](#) to Iran's Assembly of Experts, which will ultimately choose Khamenei's successor when he dies, Khamenei argued, "When they say

¹⁰ Sa'ideh-Sadat Fahri, *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, February 7, 2015 – as published and translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, February 9, 2015.

that we should change our behavior, it means we should abandon and forget about the main elements of our movement and that we should make no effort to preserve them. This is the meaning of a change of behavior. This is what is referred to – in some writings and speeches – as the religion of minimums. It means decreasing one’s ideals and this means the destruction of the inner aspect of Islam. This religion of minimums means the complete elimination of religion.” These are not just the words of Iran’s Supreme Leader; they represent a particular worldview upon which the institutions of government and state in Iran have been erected since 1979. The revolutionary Shi’i values that are an integral part of Iran’s national identity make the aim of socializing and transforming its behavior a steep challenge and a risky bet.

This bet also appears to be unacceptable for the U.S.’s historical regional allies on two levels. First, it assumes that a future Iran, after it has been socialized, transformed, and perhaps armed with nuclear weapons at the expiration of a deal, will not be threatening to its regional neighbors. This assumption ignores that an unconstrained nuclear Iran, moderate or not, will alter the regional balance of power. It also discounts the reality that the Iranian elites across the political spectrum, hard-line and reformist alike view Iran’s “true role in the region” in terms of regional leadership, which is considered illegitimate by Sunni Arab States and Israel. Second, and perhaps more important, the Obama’s plan appears to be placing a long-term bet with a distant and uncertain payoff, using its regional allies’ short-term security as its ante.

Tilting the Balance of Power

In a January 2015 interview, Hussein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran’s deputy foreign minister for African and Arab Affairs, acknowledged that “some countries” are concerned that a nuclear agreement with Iran will create new capabilities that may lead to a “new arrangement” in the region. Amir-Abdollahian also acknowledged that some in the Arab world believe that conducting nuclear talks with Iran without addressing regional issues are of no benefit.¹¹

The Saudis and others feel that in the wake of the deal Iran will quickly be reintegrated into the international diplomatic and economic system, reviving its economy and providing tacit American backing for Iran to entrench its influence in the Arab world. By the time a prospective deal expires, Iran’s regional influence would be legitimized by time and tacit American backing, and Iran would be free to pursue its nuclear ambitions. In other words, Iran’s rivals believe that this deal will help Iran increase its relative power in the region.

The nuclear negotiations with Iran, structured under the November 2013 JPOA, have not explicitly addressed regional issues, but it is the regional context that has driven how the parties have approached the negotiations. In the fifteen months since the negotiations have restarted, Iran’s presence and influence have grown in three capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, and San’a, and remained deeply entrenched in a fourth, Beirut. Writing in the late 1970s, Fouad Ajami succinctly noted that where there is excessive power, it will engender resistance.

Iran has managed to extend its influence throughout the Arab world, despite the sharp decline in the price of oil, which accounts for approximately 70 percent of Iranian government revenues, and the web of international sanctions that the international community has imposed on Iran. Iran has taken advantage of the instability in the Arab world following the uprisings in 2010 and 2011, which its leaders refer to as the “Islamic Awakening.” Iran has also demonstrated its resolve and credibility by sustaining its heavy investments in its Arab Shi’i allies. Between 2011 and 2014, it is believed that Iran spent between \$15 and \$19 **billion** on direct support to the Assad regime in Syria.¹² Iran’s current fiscal year budget is \$296 billion (based on \$72 per barrel of oil, when oil has been hovering in the mid-\$50s) and it is expecting zero economic growth for the year. Nevertheless Iran has increased defense spending by 33 percent from the previous year.¹³ In other words, despite facing strong material incentives to scale back its defense spending and support for its regional allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Lebanon, it has continued to invest in projecting its influence throughout the region, including providing material support for the Houthi (Za’idi Shi’is) takeover in Yemen, which has unfolded in parallel to the ongoing nuclear negotiations.

Iran believes its interests in neighboring Arab states are legitimate. Their national interests are shaped by unique combination of pragmatism and revolutionary Shi’i ideology. Iran has organized, trained, advised, and armed the Shi’i militias in Iraq that have been at the forefront of pushing back the June 2014 Islamic State (IS) invasion into Iraq. The Islamic State embraces a revolutionary Sunni identity that is virulently anti-Shi’i, and Iran views protecting holy Shi’i shrines in Iraq as a vital national interest. Protecting and promoting revolutionary Shi’i identity is the principle upon which Iran projects its influence

¹¹ Zeynab Esma’ili, “Problematic kiss on Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s forehead: Interview with Hossein Amir-Abdollahian,” *Shargh*, January 14, 2015 – as published and translated by BBC World Monitoring, January 15, 2015.

¹² Emile Hokayem, “Iran, the Gulf States, and the Syrian Civil War,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56:6 (2014), 59-86, here 74, footnote 12.

¹³ Hooshang Amirahmadi, “[Iran’s Neo-liberal Austerity-Security Budget](#),” *Payvand News*, February 16, 2015.

throughout the Arab world. Nevertheless, Iran also believes maintaining influence in Iraq, to ensure the Iraqi government and military forces are dependent on Iran, is also viewed as a vital interest for a nation that fought an eight-year war with Iraq. Like Iraq, Iran has framed its involvement in Syria and Lebanon and protecting Shi'i holy sites and/or Shi'i populations. However, it is also clear that Iran sustains Assad in Syria and Hizballah in Lebanon as a means of communicating to regional and international actors that regional problems can be escalated or contained depending on how they serve Iranian interests.

The Sunni Arab States, and in particular Saudi Arabia, view Iran's interference in the Arab world as illegitimate. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that just as an expected political framework for a nuclear deal with Iran was expected at the end of March, Saudi Arabia's launched its "Storm of Resolve" military operation in order to roll back the Houthi takeover of Yemen. The conservative Iranian daily newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* has characterized the [post-Arab Spring security competition](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia as "intense, extensive, fundamental, and strategic."¹⁴ Echoing Ajami, the surest sign of the intensifying regional security competition has been the Saudi's success in creating a unified group of Sunni states in support of its military operation to roll back Houthi gains in Yemen and limit Iranian support to the group and its allies. The Saudi force projection in Yemen during the past week is an unprecedented shift in Saudi strategic behavior.

Of Equilibrium and Legitimacy

The Iranians want to see American influence minimized and ultimately removed from the region, because they see the U.S. as the historical obstacle to fulfilling their "true" role as a regional power. They also want rehabilitate their economy and retain the maximum amount of freedom of action with respect to their nuclear activities and their regional influence. They are not seeking a regional balance. The Saudis and others are still trying to reconcile themselves to the changes ushered in by the Arab Spring upheavals and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They would like to see Iranian influence in Arab affairs minimized and ultimately withdrawn. They would like Iran's nuclear program to be transparent. The Obama administration would like to engineer an equilibrium between rivals, and believes the nuclear deal is the most important step in beginning to effect this change, provided it convincingly prevents Iran's path to nuclear weapons.

Iran's regional rivals are already actively resisting efforts to recalibrate the regional balance of power and accommodate a more expansive role for Iran. This process is just beginning and will probably be characterized by rapid military build-ups, increased indirect conflict (per Yemen and elsewhere), volatile brinkmanship, and reciprocal political subversion and military sabotage, involving repressed religious and ethnic minority groups. The [violent Arab unrest in Iran's Khuzestan province](#) during a soccer match in Ahvaz between an Iranian and Saudi club may be a preview of worse things to come. The U.S. has placed a big bet and now it remains to be seen whether it will pay off or whether it will lose its ante.

¹⁴ *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, January 12, 2015 – published and translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, January 17, 2015.